

Creation of the Dual Shifter

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Just a little note...

Creation of the Dual Shifter, is a spin off from my other series, *The Succubus Executioner*. While it can be read independently without having read the prior series, if you find you enjoy reading things in sequential order or just want more Olie and Logan, the series is as follows:

Dead Shifter Walking

Demigod Down

A Witch's Fury

A Council of Betrayal

Death of a Succubus

Legacy of the Succubus

Thank you and happy reading!

Chapter 1

I pulled another sip of my warmish beer. The cold steel workbench kept forcing me to shift positions if I wanted blood flow to my padded ass. Considering I had consumed half a twelve pack without moving from the unforgiving surface, I couldn't be too annoyed at it.

"So, seriously." I leaned forward to where Becca was hidden under a Chevy's engine. "Tell me about the date."

"No," she huffed again. Her leg, adorned in slate blue coveralls, kicked the concrete floor for emphasis.

"Come on!" I whined, kicking my feet like a petulant three-year-old.

"No," she repeated. She was smiling. I could tell. She was my best friend, after all.

"I tell you all the details of my dates! This isn't fair!" I may have been twenty-four and an almost-college-grad, but I wasn't giving up the power of a tantrum just yet.

She rolled out just to scowl at me, pointing a wrench in my direction, a grease smear across her left cheek. "You whore around, and I don't want those details!" she retorted, her voice pitching up.

My evil grin was wide. "Enjoying sex with multiple partners is not *whoring around*," I air quoted her, beer in hand. "And don't lie, you love those details," I added, waving my bottle around. It was probably time to put the alcohol away if I wanted to drive myself home.

"I do not," she hissed at me, careful to see if anyone was around, before rolling back under the truck. "Besides—" She paused and I leaned forward, half to relieve the lack of blood flow to my ass, but mainly so I didn't miss what she said next. "I really like this one."

Her voice was soft and I rocked back. "Tell me everything," I demanded.

"He's amazing." Becca rolled back out and stood in a practiced motion, her voice taking on a singsong quality. "He opens doors, is attentive to our conversations. Not to mention he's smokin' hot." She giggled, blushing as she rummaged around in the tool chest next to me.

"What's his name again?" I asked, really paying attention now.

"Randy," she said, shoving me lightly. I swayed too much. "I've told you about him before."

"You told me about a guy who comes in all the time to flirt and has been unable to seal the deal," I corrected her, with a gentle shake of my pointer finger.

"Whatever," she shrugged. "He asked me out last week. We had dinner and went to an art show. It was epic." Becca was a beauty. A curvy, ebony haired, full-red-lipped hidden gem. I couldn't help but smile at the lusty look in her dark eyes.

"Art show?" I repeated, disbelievingly.

She scrunched her face, closing the lid on the tool chest. "Yeah, not exactly my thing, but I had such a wonderful time with him, totally worth it. He's so easy to be around, we spent hours together and it wasn't enough."

"Uh-huh, please continue." I waved my beer-laden hand at her. "Get to the good stuff."

She rolled her eyes. “Anyways, we chatted for a while on my porch steps and he went home,” she finished with a shrug, tucking a dark lock behind her ear.

“No goodbye kiss?” I asked, clutching my beer over my heart in mock shock as I leaned unsteadily forward.

“No!” she scolded me, her cheeks reddening.

“No hot, steamy sex?” I asked, knowing there wasn’t. Where I was outlandishly sexual, Becca was shyly conservative.

“No!” she yelled, slapping a dirty rag against my, thankfully, clothed bicep.

“Eww, that thing’s seen more action than me,” I complained, brushing the black sleeve of my form-fitting graphic tee.

She laughed, “Doubtful.”

“Ehh,” I said with a shrug. That might have been true. I liked sex. I liked men, and I didn’t give a fuck who knew.

“So, when can I meet him?” I questioned eagerly.

“I don’t know. We’re just starting to date. I don’t want to scare him away,” she confessed, her lips pursed to one side as she tentatively watched my reaction.

“What?” My shock was genuine now. I knew Becca was insecure, but I’d never known her to be ashamed of me. “You think I’ll scare him off?”

She sighed, giving me a long look. “Not yet,” she amended. “You’re a free spirit, I worry he’ll think I’m like you.”

I decided to abandon that line of thinking. Becca was my best friend; not wanting me to meet Randy was about her insecurity, not a reflection on me. Still, we needed a subject change, and fast.

“Becca!” I whined. “I’m off for three months from college, what am I going to do?”

“Get ready for your last semester? Apply for internships? Beef up on social media? Read that stack of books at your mom’s?” she suggested with a relieved smile, going back to the truck.

“Pfft, no thanks. I already have a job lined up, from my internship last summer. This is supposed to be my wild summer of no regrets!” I informed her.

“Your entire life is a wild time of no regrets,” she corrected.

I shrugged. “Good point, but I need something to top it, something epic, over the top—”

“How about celibacy?” she suggested, closing the hood with a thunk before turning to look at me, one dark eyebrow raised.

“Eww, that sounds awful,” I told her, scrunching my face in disgust. “How about a sex club?” I suggested gleefully, clapping my hand on my beer bottle. “Ooh, or a Supernatural mixer club!?” I added.

Her response was immediate and forceful. “NO! We are not mixing with Supernaturals or sex fiends,” she hissed at me.

“Ugh, dang it. You can’t get tied down now!” I complained, tossing my blond head back and finishing my beer. “The Supernaturals have just gotten mainstream enough that we could actually bang them, and you’re holding us back. And I don’t even know of a sex club,” I confessed with great disappointment.

“I’m not tied down, and we don’t know any Supernaturals or a Supernatural club,” she replied with a muttered “thank god” under her breath. She wiped her hands on the nasty rag before picking up a tablet in an industrial case from the garage floor and swiping on it. The previous summer, she had upgraded to digital billing and real-time updates with Garage Helper software.

“So, you are open to dating—and I mean sleeping with—others?” I asked, knowing the answer.

“No.” She moved to stand next to me, setting the tablet down on the steel surface before fixing her ponytail with greasy hands.

“Then you are tied down,” I groaned in frustration. Ugh, time to shift gears again. “Hey, how’s the new website working?” I asked, peering over her shoulder at the tablet.

“Amazing, actually, though I do need your help on some of the updates,” she confessed.

I nodded, jotting down a note in my phone. “I’ll take care of it tonight, in between my rousing conversations with my mother and her flavor of the week.”

Becca laughed, “Don’t judge her, you’re the same way.”

I scoffed, pressing my beer-free hand to my chest. “Take it back! I do not bring them home, I do not live with them, and I do not claim to love them!”

Becca laughed, holding her hands up, relenting. “Accept my deepest apologies, oh Amazing One.”

“That’s better,” I nodded. “So, plans for tonight?”

Becca blushed with a noncommittal shrug.

“No! You are seeing him again!” I yelled in excitement.

She shrugged and I pointed at her. “Fine, but I demand you pencil me in for some time. You were mine first.”

She laughed, wrapping an arm around my side and squeezing me before I slid forward and set myself onto my legs. “You’re still my bestie, baby.”

I huffed, “I better fucking be.”

“Come on, Penni, help me finish up the invoices in the office.”

I groaned, but followed her. Ever since her dad had gotten sick, Parkinson’s with a shot of early-onset dementia, she’d pulled a heavy load here, making sure she made enough to put him in the nicest home in our small town of West Hills, Alabama. I helped her out when I could, and besides, I needed time to sober up.

And no, we’re not all hillbillies here, just most of us.

...

“Ma!” I yelled loudly, opening the pale blue front door, “I’m HOME!” Laugh all you want, but you walk in on your mom having sex just once, and see if you don’t do the same.

“We’re back here, Penelope!” she hollered from the family room.

“Great,” I mumbled. The current toy was still hanging around. I groaned my annoyance at some punk invading my home, yet again. With an eye roll no one was around to see, I carefully plastered on a fake smile as I wound my way through the front room, past the warm and inviting kitchen, and finally into the cozy family room in the back.

My mom and I had painted the room in various shades of blue. My favorite was the charismatic sky blue that adorned three of the four walls. Mom had selected the navy, almost indigo, color behind the TV and entertainment center.

My heart truly warmed at the sight of her, and then iced over as I realized I was seeing her slim form curled up on the half-pint. Her legs were drawn up, arms around his waist, while his arms were spread behind him on the couch. I felt pretty sure I could beat him in an arm wrestling match.

“How ya doing, sweetheart?” she asked, her gaze glued to the horror movie on the TV.

“Good,” I answered, turning my own gaze to the TV for a moment before heading back into the kitchen.

None of the curtains had been closed in the kitchen, giving me a clear view of the back patio and the moon-filled night through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Mom had dated a contractor once, one of her better finds, and he had started renovations on the kitchen.

Opening the white and dated refrigerator, I rooted around for something to eat. I had stayed later than I expected at Becca’s shop and planned to be back early to help her catch up on the disorganized mess known as the office, not to mention the past due accounts. The girl was too damn nice. I had no reservations about putting the screws to delinquents.

Rustling on the couch drew my attention back to the present and buoyed my hopes that my mom was coming to visit with me.

“Hey, Penni.” Ugh. My mom’s new boy toy—Mark, Marco, Rufus? I couldn’t keep them straight.

Standing, I closed the fridge, noting how his eyes took a few long moments to move from my ass to my face.

“What?” I snipped.

“You hungry?” Dipshit asked.

I raised an eyebrow, watching as he cast a look behind him, no doubt checking that my mother was still entranced with whatever crap she was watching.

“Your intelligence is staggering,” I flung at him.

A slow smile spread over his, I admit, handsome face. “I got something for ya.”

“Your pickup lines need work,” I told him, opening the fridge again to get back to pulling out supplies for a sandwich.

“Oh, come on, don’t be a cock tease,” he complained softly, moving uncomfortably close when I closed the door.

“I’m not,” I answered, moving around him to the butcher block island and setting down my turkey, Swiss cheese, lettuce and other fixings.

“Come on,” he tried, stepping closer, inches from my body. “You walk around in these tight tops, and perfectly formed jeans. You know what it does to me.”

I raised an eyebrow as I turned to grab the bread from the counter. “MOM! Your creepy boyfriend is hitting on me!” I yelled. What the literal fuck? I had been home from school for less than 48 hours.

She snapped off the couch, rounding the corner with hellfire in her eyes. “What did you say to her?”

See, this wasn’t the first time this had happened, and considering her age requirements were lowering, it wouldn’t be the last. The worst had to be when I was eighteen and her boyfriend tried to sneak into my bed. He now pees into a bag and walks with a limp.

“Nothing, baby, nothing,” Loser Boy began. He shot me a pissed-off glare.

“Apparently, by wearing clothing, I’m a cock tease,” I reported, taking my sandwich up the stairs to my bedroom.

“You did NOT say that to her,” my mother started in on him.

I didn’t bother listening to the rest of the conversation. She wasn’t done with his cock quite yet, so he would be staying. Maybe I could room with Becca while I was home? No, she was dating Randy. Ugh, was I going to be stuck in my house with a creeper until I started the next semester?

Maybe taking a summer off wasn’t my best idea.

Chapter 2

“Good morning, sunshine!” I greeted Becca in her office the next morning, handing her a cup from Beckman’s Coffeehouse.

She blinked bloodshot eyes at me, her gaze hitting my own before resting on the large latte with an extra shot of espresso. She took the offered beverage after a long delay that had my smile fading.

“Why are you here so early?” she asked before taking a hearty sip.

“It’s nine a.m., sugar. How was the date?” I asked, plopping myself into a worn fabric-and-wood seat in front of her sad, dated, metal desk. Becca set her coffee down, rubbing her red eyes. I tilted my head at her, expectantly.

“Short.” She latched back onto the coffee, taking another sip. “Dad fell.” Her gaze swung to mine as she delivered the news.

“What?” I asked mid-sip, resting the plastic travel container on my knee, sip forgotten. Abandoning my relaxed position, I sat on the edge of the chair. “Why the fuck are you here?” I demanded.

She shrugged, running a hand through unwashed locks to adjust her tied-up dark hair, her chin trembling with repressed emotions. I was by her side, arms wrapped around her, in the next moment. Her soft sobs broke my heart.

There wasn’t anything to say. I wasn’t foolish enough to think an “it will be okay” was going to do any damn good, so I just held her until she pulled back, wiping her eyes and smearing her mascara.

“Go, I got this,” I told her, squeezing her shoulder.

“You can’t fix cars,” she tried with a smirk.

“True, but I can handle phone calls and customers. Everyone will understand. Go, be with him,” I told her sincerely, pushing on her shoulder.

She nodded, blowing out a breath. “I’ll call you later?”

“Yes, before you call Randy to make hot monkey love to you,” I agreed, walking her out.

She smiled, handing over the shop key at the office door. “Thanks, girl.”

“Anytime.”

She stopped, taking two quick steps back into the office, pointer finger out at me. “My mechanic, Ford, will be here around ten. Do not sleep with him.”

I pouted and she amended, “During business hours.”

“What kind of name is Ford?” I yelled at her retreating back.

“It fits, trust me,” she answered, not bothering to turn around.

Worry dragged down my lips into a frown. Her mom had bailed years ago, with Becca at the tender age of six. Her dad had done his best to raise her. In junior high, we had tried and failed to set her dad and my mom up, with the plan of being sisters.

I loved him as much as I possibly could with the dysfunction and distrust of men I was brought up with.

In so many ways, Becca and I were polar opposites, but having the love of only one parent had bonded us. I'd walk through fire for her, take a bullet. Watching her hurt and not being able to do anything was digging a hole in my chest.

I had visited him once in the care facility with her, and I couldn't do it again.

Pulling myself from that horrid memory, I focused on the tasks at hand: organize the desk, second task collect past due accounts.

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Ford walked through the open bay door of the shop and stopped. Turning in a half circle, he examined the Chevy Silverado in the next bay before he turned again. Something didn't smell right, and he would know. His shifter senses were far above those of a normal human. He pulled a deep breath into the crevices of his lungs before continuing his walk into the open bay. Honeysuckle and wild orange assaulted him and tightened his chest unexpectedly.

Ford paused in his perusal. His wolf, dormant after the run last night, raised his head, acknowledging the sensation.

Around the truck Becca had been working on, he followed the unfamiliar scent into the office, readying himself for a fight if Becca had been harmed. Instead, he found himself mesmerized by a long-haired blond standing in front of neatly piled papers, her delicate brow furrowed in concentration. His gaze dipped over the supple curves hardly restrained by her blue jeans, a white tank covering what the blue plaid button-up couldn't contain. He fidgeted uncomfortably at the tightening in his jeans, his heart rate accelerating.

Blowing out a breath of appreciation, he knocked on the door molding.

Her hazel gaze jerked to his own penetrating brown one.

"Hi," he began, running a hand through his brown locks.

"Oh lord, tell me you're not Ford," she huffed out.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm Ford." He gave her his best charming smile, which had been known to drop a panty or few.

"Dammit, no wonder she gave me the warning," the mystery woman complained, pouting supple pink lips.

"Excuse me?" he asked, willing his raging hard-on down. Her gaze traveled down as she nibbled on her bottom lip. He scented her desire on the air and bit back a groan.

"Lord, I'm not allowed to sleep with you on the property during business hours," she admitted, her gaze finally finding his again.

Ford sputtered an answer before finally just nodding. There really wasn't a way to answer that, except to invite her back to his place after work and while her scent clearly indicated she was interested, he had just met her. Dating or sleeping with a potential stalker wasn't on his list of things to do.

"So, where's Becca?" Ford finally asked, his brain cells kicking back into gear.

"Oh, she's with her Dad. He fell, hospice is with him," she said. Her voice shook and Ford was glad he had calmed down on the inviting her over to his place, not that he was taking that off the table entirely.

"And you are?" Ford gave her a half smile in response to her own laugh and grin.

“Penni, sorry, guess my mind is elsewhere.”

...

Like in all the ways I wanted to fuck him. That’s where my mind was, in graphic detail undressing him and worshipping what I guessed were well-sculpted muscles stretching his gray coveralls.

“Anyways, I’m here helping out in the office. No mechanical knowledge here, but if we get busy, I got the go-ahead to bring in additional help,” I finished.

Ford nodded, his espresso eyes fixed on my own, before clearing his throat. “I think I’ve got it, but I’ll keep you updated.”

I smiled, “Appreciate that.”

He left to work, which was the reason he was there, as I tried hard to find a reason I needed to go back out and see him again.

...

A growl in my stomach provided that opportunity. I was really hoping Ford took a lunch and that he wanted to have it with me.

Rounding the corner, I found him setting his tools into the box, the automatic bay doors closing.

“Hey,” I started, suddenly nervous, “I was going to grab lunch and wanted to see if you wanted to come with me?”

Okay, clearly not my best pickup line. My original plan of “Wanna eat?” with a wink and smile had totally gone out the window at his dark chocolate hair falling over his eye. He flicked it back with a shake of his head and I cleared my throat.

“Dirty Joe’s?” he asked.

“What?” I responded.

He smiled. “Dirty Joe’s,” he repeated. “They have the best coffee and the sandwiches aren’t bad, either.”

“Oh,” I answered with a smile, “yeah, that sounds perfect.”

“Give me a second to get cleaned up.” Ford said, nodding down at his grease-stained hands.

“Of course, I’ll be in the office,” I said, smiling, my stomach fluttering around in glee.

...

I’d like to say I had lost myself in some task, but that would be a lie. I was impatiently waiting for Ford, excited for our lunch date. Wait, was it a date? I was okay with it being that, and hopefully I’d still feel that way after.

I was clicking around aimlessly on the computer when he knocked on the doorframe.

“Ready?” he asked. The coveralls gone, jeans and a buffalo plaid button-down making me drool.

“Yep,” I answered, far too loudly.

Ford locked up the customer door and I slapped on an “Out to Lunch” sign with my cell phone number. I didn’t want anyone bothering Becca.

“How do you know Becca?” Ford asked while we waited at one of the three red lights our town had to boast of.

“We were neighbors, went to school together. I’ve been away at college, while she’s been running things here,” I answered and Ford nodded. Checking that the street was clear as the walk sign flashed at us, he placed a hand on the small of my back as we crossed.

Well, damn. Color me impressed.

He even held the door for me, guiding me inside with his hand on the small of my back again. Sold, ladies and gentlemen, sold.

Dirty Joe’s had an easy, laid-back atmosphere and a long counter for ordering and sizing up their various pastries and sandwiches. I immediately fell in love with a BLT.

“Let me know when y’all are ready,” smiled the teenager behind the counter.

I smiled, stepping forward to place my order, as another cashier stepped up and waved Ford over.

Orders placed, we picked out a table next to the floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto a side street dotted with various colorful flowers.

“How long have you worked for Becca?” I asked, taking a sip of my coffee. Ford was correct, it was delicious.

“Almost two years,” he said, sipping his own brew from a coral oversized circular mug.

I nodded, “Guess it’s been a bit since I’ve been in the shop.”

And given she had warned me off of sleeping with him, she probably hadn’t wanted me around for most of that time. I’d have to bring up that point with her later.

I now understood why Ford fit his name so well. He was built like a damn truck—wide, tall, and all hard-corded muscle that I wanted to rub on. Lord, those espresso eyes were drawing me in.

I cleared my throat. “I haven’t seen you in town before.”

He nodded. “I moved in a few years ago, I guess four this year.”

“My timing sucks, or yours does, that we haven’t met sooner,” I flirted with a smile.

He chuckled as our food was delivered. The BLT smelled amazing, my mouth watering for a crisp bite.

Thanking our server, he turned his gaze back to mine, holding it for a moment before he said, “I’m glad we’ve met now.”

I could only grin and blush in response. There was something very disarming about him. I felt safe, really safe, and I liked it. Like I could relax for a breath and he would take care of me. I liked it. I liked him.

...

Back in the shop office, I had the destruction zone known as the desk organized into files and was on my fifth collection call. Thankfully, everyone had been pretty decent about it, claiming they had forgotten. Once I dropped the news about Becca’s father, they were quick to pay by credit card over the phone.

She might beat me for spilling her news, but she’d hug me for the day’s profits.

I still was trying to figure out ways to accidentally bump into, need to ask questions of, or just in general interact with Ford. I was coming up with nothing. Dammit.

I called Becca when I was closing. “Hey,” she answered, exhaustion punctuating the greeting.

“Hey, how’s it going?” I asked. Ugh, crappy question. Why did I ask that?

“Shitty. Tell me something good,” came the rapid-fire response.

“I didn’t sleep with Ford at work during business hours,” I offered as a subject change.

She huffed, possibly laughed, “Good.”

“I also collected on thirty-five percent of your outstanding invoices,” I said, surprising her by rattling off the exact number.

She whistled. “With numbers like that, I’m not sure I could be mad even if you did sleep with Ford.”

“Right?” I agreed. “Do you need anything?” I asked.

She sniffed, “No, Randy is coming over in a few. He’s bringing food.”

“You home?” I asked.

“Yeah, there isn’t much I can do. I can only stare at him for so long in that limp condition.” Her voice broke. “I don’t think he’s coming back this time.”

“I’m on my way,” I said as I finished locking up the office and main door.

She huffed. “No, you’ve done enough. Besides, I don’t want you to have to be the third wheel.”

“But I’m such a cute third wheel,” I teased, unlocking my car.

She did laugh at my ridiculousness, so maybe I was doing something right. “I know.”

“Alright, well, I’ll be in tomorrow. Gotta earn my keep.”

“I’m not paying you,” she reminded me.

“You could, in sex from your employees.”

She groaned, “That’s illegal.”

“Ehh, but it would be so, so fun.”

“Goodbye.”

“Love you, call me if you need anything.” I hung up, turning to open my car door.

...

“Penni?” Ford called out once she got off the phone, trying to keep the laughter out of his voice from overhearing her conversation with Becca.

She started, resting a hand over heart, turning to see him. Ford gave her an apologetic smile.

“Hey Ford, what’s going on?” she asked, returning his smile easily.

“Well, I, um, had a really nice time at lunch, and I was wondering if you wanted to come over for dinner tonight.” It was sudden and he wasn’t optimistic that she’d agree to his timeline.

Penni smiled, hazel eyes alight. “Tonight sounds perfect, give me a chance to get cleaned up?”

Ford laughed, "Yeah, I could use a chance to clean up, too." He stepped forward, hand out, voice soft. "Can I give you my number?"

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I handed over my phone. I'd have handed over my bank account for that voice and the way those eyes were captivated by me.

Ford quickly entered his phone number and address. As he handed my phone back to me, our hands brushed, my gaze locking onto his. He leaned in, I leaned in. He pulled my phone from my grasp. Placing one hand between my shoulder blades, he used the second to slip the phone into my back pocket before squeezing my ass and dragging me against him.

I giggled, my hands bracing against his chest. He nibbled at my bottom lip and I hungrily granted him access. One stroke of his tongue against mine, and I writhed against him. I wanted the bulge in his jeans rubbing freely against me. He peppered kisses against my jaw and neck, his touches light and teasing.

Taking a painful step back, Ford held onto me for a moment, closing his eyes and biting his bottom lip. I watched his gaze focus on my lips before swinging up to my eyes.

"You taste amazing," he whispered on a growl.

I smiled and wagged my eyebrows to his laugh.

"Much as I'd like to continue this, we're still at work," I whispered.

"Right, see you soon?" Ford said, holding open my car door for me.

"Soon," I agreed with a smile.

...

Loser Boy whistled. "Heeeeyyyyy, hot stuff."

"Tim, I told you, that's enough!" my mom scolded her boyfriend, I'd say almost playfully.

I rolled my eyes. "Where you going all sexed out?" he asked.

"To get supremely pleased by a man who makes me cream my panties just by speaking," I answered, fanning myself. "Not that it's any of your business."

"He got a brother?" Mom asked on the couch next to Tim.

I laughed while Tim looked down in shock at her head resting on his shoulder. "I'll ask," I answered with a wink.

"What the hell?" I heard Tim ask as the screen door closed behind me.

"I was just teasing," my mom said. I huffed. Nope, she wasn't. Tim's time here was comin' to a close. Couldn't happen to a nicer man.

I texted Ford. *On my way.*

His response was immediate. *I made you balls -- uh, meatballs.*

Saucy, but there better be dessert.

Shit.

Not kidding! I sent.

Plugging the address into my navigation app, I put my car in drive, following the pristine voice.

Thirty minutes and several twisting back roads later, I sent another text to Becca, which was answered instantly with, *I'm fine*. Not being with her still sat wrong in my gut, but I was respecting her wishes and, honestly, I really wanted to get laid.

Stepping out of my car in my flip-flops, jean skirt and deep teal tank, I hoped I was putting off the air of sexy, but ready to nap. Smoothing down my freshly blow-dried blond locks, I admired the well-maintained home with freshly cut grass and a white door, which was open.

I should have been a little worried, or at least concerned. While my mom knew what I was up to, I hadn't given her the address. I dismissed that thought as soon as it crossed my mind, something innate telling me to trust Ford—possibly my deprived sex organs. And yes, three months counts as deprived. Ford stood there, black sweatpants slung low, a crisp blue shirt hugging his dense arms and perfect stomach.

"Hey," I breathed out in a whisper, my lips pulling up at just the sight of him.

He smiled, reaching out to drag me into the house with one strong arm around my waist. He looked down at me and I felt the heat of his gaze, my breathing shallow from our close proximity. "Where's your overnight bag?" he whispered, nuzzling my neck with soft kisses.

"Car. I'm not sure I'm staying the night," I confessed, my eyes closing in bliss as his teeth nipped at my pulse.

He rumbled a laugh, releasing me and turning me around. "Go get it," he scolded, the sting of his hand against my plush ass far more alluring than I'd even dreamed it could be.

I narrowed my gaze at him over my shoulder. "You're bossy."

He moved closer behind me, running his fingers over my hip and under my tank. "If you don't want to stay, you don't have to, but I'm planning on turning your legs to jelly, and I don't want to have to walk out and get it later."

"Damn you and those sexy words," I said, stepping out to get my bag.

He had moved from the doorway when I returned. I crossed the threshold, impressed by how clean it all was, closing the heavy door behind me. I set my small satchel down on the floor of the foyer.

"What are you doing?" I asked, sitting on one of the three black leather bar stools. The entire kitchen was a stainless-steel dream. White subway tile framed light charcoal gray cabinets, and a gray swirl marble countertop matched perfectly with the floor. Accented with hints of navy, it was an impressive kitchen.

"Browning the meatballs," he answered, tossing a dish towel over his shoulder.

I smiled, "Yum."

"Do you want a salad?"

"Yes, please."

He turned, stalking toward me with a smoldering smile. Dammit, just in his freaking presence I was hornier than a virgin in a strip club. It wasn't freaking fair. He looked down at me and I tilted my head in a silent question. Walking his fingers down my exposed shoulder and over my wrist, he took my hand, pulling me up. I smiled, thinking he wanted to skip dinner.

He walked me backwards until I was pressed against the fridge, my eyes glued to his lips.

"Then you should make one for yourself," he commanded, before moving away with a teasing smile.

“Oh my lord, you are a tease!” I yelled, jerking the stainless steel, side-by-side fridge open with far more force than necessary. Mom needed one of these, not that she would ever splurge for it.

He did nothing but grin at my frustration, standing at the stove.

“Think how much better it will be with the buildup,” he taunted.

“Sorry, I can’t hear you over my sexual frustration,” I answered loudly.

His low throaty laugh washed over me in delicious torture. I made a show out of looking for the cucumbers, plainly before me in the bottom drawer, finally snagging the bag before I slowly stood up. I peeked over at him, food forgotten for a moment as his mouth hung open.

“Are you wearing anything under that skirt?” he breathed.

I gave him a half smile and a shrug, grabbing the lettuce and tomatoes.

“Bowls?” I asked.

He pointed to a cabinet by the sink.

“Do you want one?” I asked, taking down two stoneware white bowls with a thick blue band around the top.

“Please,” he answered, shifting his attention back to the meatballs and adjusting the bulge in his pants.

I narrowed my gaze at his back, wanting to screw with him. Not seeing an opening, I went to the sink to wash the lettuce.

The cool water ran over my fingers for a moment before Ford asked, “What brings you back to this small town?”

I huffed and smiled down at the leafy greens. “My mom lives here still. I didn’t want to do summer school and pay rent or work for free on another internship. So I opted to spend some quality time where I grew up before I graduate, since my job waiting for me after graduation is in Texas,” I answered him.

“Texas?” He repeated.

I nodded. “A massive marketing firm wants my brain.” I felt the pang of loss at being so far from my mother. But I was hopeful she’d move out there—new fish in a new pond and all.

“What about you?” I asked, turning my mind away from that depressing train of thought. “What brings you to the remote reaches of the wilds of ‘Bama?”

He laughed, his eyes dancing as he turned to look at me. “I like the wilds.”

I giggled and rolled my eyes. “This is a nice place for a bachelor who fixes cars,” I remarked.

“Is there something wrong with fixing cars for a living?” he questioned me seriously, pausing in his cooking.

“Nope, not at all. But knowing you do, I expected you to be living in a run-down apartment, stocking your money into booze and fast cars,” I answered honestly with a shrug.

He laughed, turning to me. “Do you have a filter?”

“I do, and it’s dusty.” He laughed again and the sound made my middle all smushy. I pushed that thought away. I didn’t care if I made him laugh and I didn’t care if he thought I was funny.

...

Ford watched Penni dice up cucumbers and tomatoes for the salad. He paused; where had she found the cutting board?

“Dressing?” she asked.

“Fridge,” he said, nodding his head in that direction as he dished out a portion of meatballs and pasta on each plate.

Ford walked the short distance to the dining room, setting down the plates before going back for silverware. She followed with the salads and a bottle of dressing under her arm.

“Wine, beer, mixed drink?” he asked, watching as she set down the bowls.

“Surprise me,” she said with a shrug and a smile over her shoulder.

...

“Easy on the dressing there, turbo,” Ford commented, setting down their beers.

“Careful, or I won’t leave any for you,” I threatened, dumping even more.

He chuckled, sitting down across the darkly stained farm-style table from me.

“Your table is amazing,” I commented, running a hand over the inlaid pattern on the dark wood.

“Thanks, I made it,” he said.

“What?” I exclaimed.

“I’m older than I look,” he commented dryly. “Mechanic isn’t my first job.”

“Huh, I’m really hoping those extra years translate into extra skills in the bedroom.” I waggled my eyebrows.

He coughed on his pasta and I took a bite of my own, moaning, “Oh my lord, that is fantastic.”

...

He had been talked dirty to before, even until he blushed. But there was something disarming about her honesty. She cut right through the bullshit and game playing. He didn’t think she realized it, but it was also a direct line to her heart. She had a good one. Anyone who would work full-time for free was a good person.

“How long are you covering for Becca?” he asked after accepting her praises. Ford’s hand shook and his wolf reared up unexpectedly, catching him off guard.

She shrugged, meeting his dark gaze. “The summer, I think. Based on her dad and the level of disorganization in her office, I think there is plenty of work for me. Besides, if I get caught up, I can always go back to tweaking her website or launching her social media presence.”

“What are you majoring in?” he asked.

“Marketing, with an emphasis on social media mastery,” she embellished.

He took a sip of his beer. “That’s the official title?”

“No,” she answered, eating another bite of pasta. “That’s my own personal spin on it.”

He laughed, a strained sound. “Gotcha.”

“Come on, ask the next question,” she coached him.

“What’s that?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“What do I plan on doing with my life?” she informed him.

“That’s a heavy question, and at what, twenty-two, you think you know?” His wolf was riding him hard; not allowing his eyes to change was an exercise in willpower he wasn’t sure he could win. His wolf had always been strong and dominant. If he had ever wanted it, he could have been an alpha, but it never seemed worth the headache.

...

“I’m twenty-four, and I want to open my own marketing firm specializing in startups,” I said. “I want to help people like Becca get ahead, at an affordable rate.”

He nodded at me, wiping his mouth with the white napkin. His lack of reaction had me narrowing my eyes at him, wondering what in the world he was thinking behind that dark and broody brow.

“That’s quite a plan, I hope it all works out for you,” he finally stated.

I nodded, turning my focus back to my food and draining my beer.

...

He was standing at the sink as I sat on a stool, both of us not quite recovered from our earlier serious conversation. I was debating another beer, but I wasn’t sure if Ford still wanted me around. Meanwhile, I still wanted to jump his bones. Chewing my lip, I watched Ford rinse another dish.

“Need help?” I asked, slipping off my stool and standing close to him.

He looked up from the soapy water, his eyes taking me in sharply. I gave him a smile, waiting for him to either confirm my suspicions he wanted me gone, or push past the strange situation at dinner.

He nodded, still not speaking. I continued to chew my bottom lip, feeling a wave of unfamiliar insecurity wash over me. I usually knew how to handle any and every situation thrown at me. Call it a bonus of having a mom who had no boundaries and let me watch porn at twelve.

He leaned against me, hip to hip, before placing a bowl into my section of the sink. I looked up, encountering his lips close to my own. “I was wondering what was going on,” I confessed.

He set the last plate in front of me, watching me as I rinsed it and stowed it in the drain board.

“You are more than I expected,” he confessed.

Oh, that damn smushy feeling in my gut. “I think you should stop talking,” I whispered, reaching on tiptoe to capture his lips.

He answered my advances with a growl, not letting me lead the kiss for long. I couldn’t help my smile when he boxed me against the sink, a hand on either side of me, his wide body pressed divinely against mine. The man was built like a damn hulk. Nothing on him was soft, well currently, at least. His loose sweatpants had tented and what he was pressing against me had me salivating.

The heat from earlier in the auto shop flared to life with an almost painful passion, a moan from the back of my throat pushing my hormones into overdrive. My hands slipped under his tightly fitted cotton t-shirt to his scorching skin beneath.

My body rocked forward, electricity sparking between my fingertips and his stomach. He growled and the kiss, exploratory, changed to demanding. I answered his nibbles and quickened pace, pushing his shirt up and off.

We stood there, staring at one another. I had never felt anything like this before. Both of us just breathed for a moment—panted, labored breathing. Then I pulled off my own shirt, distracting myself, and him, from those thoughts.

...

His wolf had been present during dinner, silently observing in a setting where he would usually lay dormant. It unnerved Ford at first. He knew, felt, when Penni picked up on it, growing insecure. He had expected her to bolt, to make up some excuse to grab her bag and leave.

But she hadn't. She had gone to him, come up next to him, trusting him and in turn, unknowingly, his wolf. While the world now knew about shifters, vampires, and other beings that went bump in the dark, his pack had opted to wait in hiding, seeing no reason to upset their status quo.

He knew at some point the truth would come out, but currently, it was just easier to function as he always had. The kiss was intense. Her delicate fingers against his skin called to his wolf and he came howling to the surface, heat searing where she teased him.

The moment had changed. Pulling back to search her hazel eyes, he wanted to comment about it, but the reveal of her naked skin and sheer bra killed any rational thought. His lips were commanding on hers and she yielded to him, satisfying his wolf.

Something about his wolf's involvement should have bothered him, but he was too absorbed by her fingers digging into his ass, grinding his almost painful erection against her.

...

Oh. My. God. His ass was perfect. I groaned, pressing against him, needing more, wanting more, my overheated body demanding it.

Reading my mind, or perhaps more accurately my writhing body and demanding noises, he grabbed my own ass, not taking near as much pleasure as I did in groping, and lifted me. I eagerly wrapped my legs around his tapered waist, not breaking the kiss.

My hands nestled into his chocolate locks, holding him close, needing him closer. Doors opened and closed and I was ignorant to it all, until he dropped me on my back on a plush bed.

I blinked up at him, an unhappy sound vibrating from my chest, displeased by his body leaving mine. Pushing up to my elbows, I unhooked my bra, tossing it behind me. Shedding clothing had worked once, after all.

His naked chest heaved, his perfectly tan, chiseled skin dominating my vision. I reached for him, walking towards him on my knees, my fingers just brushing his chest.

"Ford," I whispered, looking up through bedroom eyes into his dark depths, "I need you."

He growled low in his throat, hooking his hands in my skirt, pulling it off and landing me back on my back with a swift and well practice move. "Mmm, no underwear," he whispered, running his fingertips

gently up my inner thigh. I shook. From need, desire, anticipation. I didn't have the brain cells to analyze it all.

My entire focus was on where I wanted those thick fingers to go. I leaned up to strip him of his offending clothing, only to have a hand plant between my breasts and push me down as he climbed onto the bed, all his weight on his knees.

I arched against him, begging with my body for what we both needed. He shifted his hand from my chest to cradle the back of my neck, leaning our foreheads together as he gently laid me back down. "Patience," he counseled.

I huffed, wiggling, trying to get the firmly not-moving fingers where I needed them. Flipping his hand, he brushed his knuckles down my thigh, away from the goods.

I groaned, frustrated at the lack of progress. Laying his palm flat on my thigh, he dragged it up and I writhed with unattended need.

He kissed me then, slow and easy, taunting me, until I clawed his chest. His thumb dragged down my slit and I was on fire. He had only placed a glancing touch and I was coming apart. Never had any man had this profound of an effect on me. It should worry me, a distant thought warned, and perhaps it would later. Currently I needed him, with the desperation of an addict.

He parted my core, massaging my bud of nerves slowly, drawing out the delicious torture before sliding two fingers into my welcoming warmth.

"Fuck, how are you so wet?" he asked, leaning against my forehead again.

"I need you," I whispered. "Please," I begged.

He pumped his fingers inside of me, hitting every nerve I had, sending my back arching, a whispered scream on my lips. But it wasn't enough, not nearly.

His thumb came up to massage my nerve endings again before he cursed. "I can't wait," he panted, removing his fingers.

"Thank fucking heaven," I whispered, sitting up, my gaze following him as he stood on the floor. I watched him discard his sweat pants, noting the lack of underwear.

He pulled a condom from the pocket of his discarded pants, making quick work of the foil before pressing me down and pulling a leg over his hip. I shifted myself under him, tilting my hips up, trying to capture his thick manhood.

His arms braced on either side of my head as I waited with impatience. He kissed me again, before slowly pressing his tip into me.

My hands latched onto his arms, sensations I had never known taking over my brain. Inch by glorious inch, he worked into my body, aware of his girth, stretching me to new heights. Fully sheathed, I dropped my head to the bed beneath me, mesmerized by the flecks of honey swarming in his eyes, pooling and disappearing, only to surface again in his chocolate depths.

"Good?" he whispered.

I nodded and he moved within me, powerful thrusts that sent me whirling in sensations of color and feeling. My brain shutdown, all rational thought discarded, all I knew was Ford and the incredible pleasure he was building. I crested the top at alarming speed, crying out his name. Clawing at his back, I gave in to the crash of pleasure.

Still he didn't relent, instead taking both my ankles over his shoulders. I groaned as he hit new sensitive spots, sending pleasure vibrating throughout my body. The intensity of his fucking was amazing. I was mesmerized by it, consumed by the build, screaming again as pleasure poured out of me.

I panted, pressing a hand against his chest, needing a minute.

"More baby, I need more," he whispered, his voice rough, his hands kneading my flesh.

I nodded. Before I could build a solid thought, he had me flipped over on my forearms and was inside of me again. His heat was intense, exceeding all my vast bedroom experiences.

I groaned, rocking back against him. He slapped my ass and I felt my internal muscles contract against him. A satisfied growl met my ears and I rocked again. His hands gripped my hips, swirling and grinding, sending me into overload as I cried out yet again. He pounded into me, the slaps of our flesh filling my ears and consuming my body.

I tensed, amazed that I could possibly build up again, before his pace increased, driving me mad and ripping a scream from my throat.

I felt his seed release, warm and thick, before my legs gave out and I landed in a heap. He nuzzled my neck, slipping out of me and disposing of the condom before falling next to me.

"You want that overnight bag?"

I grunted an answer at him before giving in to the lethargy in my limbs.

...

Ford watched her, before snuggling into her back. He couldn't touch her enough, couldn't get close enough. Hypnotized by her long, blond locks splashed across his charcoal gray pillowcase, he collapsed next to her, content.

Laying his head next to hers on the same pillow, he breathed in her scent deeply, any lingering tension from the day or from drama with the packs draining away. He was glad she was staying, and it certainly was a nice ego boost to see her fall asleep so easily.

...

My bladder was screaming at me. I huffed out a breath, a dull ache between my legs reminding me of exactly where I was and who was nestled up with me.

I gave serious thought to ignoring my body's demand, but I had neglected to brush my teeth after dinner and my mouth had a funk all its own.

Rolling carefully away from Ford's warm, comforting weight, I padded to the bathroom, smiling and pausing in my trek when I saw that he had brought my overnight bag up.

Down, smushy feeling, down.

Quietly closing the door, I flicked on the light. Under normal circumstances, I would have admired how huge the area was, how I definitely needed to soak in that oversized tub and try those jets out, but currently, I just wanted to sleep.

...

Ford woke up to an empty bed, with the moonlight slipping through cracks in the blinds. His wolf inside was beating at him to move, although he didn't know where or why.

Penni.

The thought had him searching the bed before he saw the light on in the bathroom and heard the running water.

Leaning back, he raked a hand through his hair, calming the beast within. After a moment, the light switched off and she padded out in a tank top and underwear.

“You look better naked,” he told her, earning a surprised yip.

“I’ll never get to back to sleep if we are both naked,” she whispered at him.

He chuckled. “Strip,” he ordered.

She huffed, and he knew her independent nature would take offense at that command. But the sexy vixen in her would torment him for it.

“Make me,” she countered with an adorable head tilt.

He bounded off the bed, relishing her squeal and halfhearted attempt to run away.

Chapter 3

Slurping down cereal at Ford's kitchen bar, I checked the messages I had slept through overnight.

"They're moving Becca's dad out of hospice," I told the sex god cooking bacon at the stove.

He turned, bringing me a coffee.

"That's great," he rumbled, dropping a kiss against my temple.

I nodded while reaching for the magic beans.

He laughed at me, handing the cup over. "You tired?" he teased.

I glared at him. "Your stamina is insane."

He fully laughed, crossing his arms, watching me. I narrowed my eyes at him. "Don't get a big head about it."

Sauntering over, he captured my lips, coffee forgotten. "I will get a big head, later, so we can work on your stamina."

"Dammit, stop making me wet." I swatted at him playfully.

Ford groaned, "Woman, you are lucky there is bacon cooking."

I laughed, retying my wet ponytail.

...

I spent a good ten minutes ogling Ford's ass while he bent over the hood of a car at Becca's shop. Lord, that gorgeously rugged man.

"Woman, don't you have things to do?" he asked, standing and setting one tool down in exchange for another.

"I'm on hold," I complained, shooing him. "Go back to being eye candy."

He laughed, "I think that counts as sexual harassment."

"It's only harassment if you don't want me worshiping your body. It is, however, one hundred percent sexual," I agreed with a wink.

That damn half smile he leveled at me had everything south of the border clenching as his smoldering gaze slowly worked back to my eyes.

I couldn't help my answering smile.

"Hello, this is Betty at TruWest Bank, how can I help you?" said a voice in my ear at last.

I blinked dumbly several times before remembering why I had called. "Betty! Good to hear your voice!"

...

Betty was a damn impressive negotiator. I tried the "poor Becca" card to get all the account management fees and transaction limit fees on the garage's accounts refunded—granted, it wasn't a huge amount, but I

was of the mindset that every little bit helped. Betty only gave me about half. But she did allow me to switch the accounts over to ones that wouldn't be subject to those fees again.

Tired of talking to people, I switched to working on Becca's website and creating graphics for branding.

It was after lunch when Lionel walked into the office. "You the woman in charge?" he asked with a rough smile.

"Always," I said with an answering grin. "I'm shocked to see you in town."

He shrugged, slipping out of his jacket before pulling out his checkbook. "This damn new fancy truck ain't as easy as my old pickup."

"Old Betsy," I teased him. Lionel had been our softball coach when Becca and I were in middle school. He didn't have any kids of his own, and he kept to himself mostly. But Mom had cornered him about being a recluse when we needed a coach. He ended up coaching us all the way until we started high school, and had kept on coaching the Hornets ever since.

He laughed, and not a damn laugh line creased his face. He looked exactly the same in every photo, year after year after year. "She was a beaut, that Betsy. Speaking of, how's your mom?"

I winked. "Still waiting for you to call and make an honest woman of her."

He laughed, a slow blush creeping up his neck into his hazelnut hair. He busied himself writing the check. "I heard she got a boyfriend living with her."

"Meh, he's a boy, alright. I don't see him sticking around much longer," I answered, pulling up Lionel's invoice on the computer and printing a receipt.

"Oh, why's that?" he asked, pretending disinterest.

"He's a jerk who likes to pick up on me, even while my mom is home," I answered, slipping the paper in front of him.

His hand stilled as he slowly searched my hazel-eyed gaze with his own sky blue eyes, the smile gone.

"Relax, Lionel, I can handle myself."

"You shouldn't have to." I didn't miss the low rumble of his tone change.

"Why don't you come over for dinner? You can see for yourself how temporary he is." Usually, my suggestions of anything romantic with my mother were refused with a blush and a shrug. That wasn't the case this time.

He went back to finishing his check in silence, broken only by the perforated paper being ripped from its home. I was shocked it came out in one piece, given how tense his forearms were in his rolled up plaid shirtsleeves.

"I'll check my calendar, things are kinda busy right now," he finally said, holding my gaze.

I smiled, "You do that." And that conversation was blissfully over.

He nodded, taking his jacket and heading out. Stopping in the doorway, he added, "Oh, and you should come by the field this weekend. The kids love to run circles around my former players." His shit-eating grin said he knew I wasn't running my old six miles a day.

"I'll check my schedule," I told him with a wink.

I stood, stretching and walking onto the garage floor. “Ford I’m grabbing lunch, do you want anything?” He and Lionel were leaned over the new truck’s hood.

“Lord, I thought you’d never ask,” he answered, rattling off his order before going back to showing whatever it was to Lionel.

...

Lionel waited until Penni’s steps turned the corner before he stood up. “You’re sleeping with her.” It wasn’t a question.

“I am,” Ford stated. He knew his scent was wrapped up with Penni’s now, marking her, and his wolf fucking loved it. He knew he should ask Lionel about it, too. While his scent transferring wasn’t uncommon, the marking was new. But no sense in getting things worked up, more so than they potentially were already. He assumed the scents would untwine once they parted company for an extended period of time.

“Does she know?” Lionel asked, his alpha eyes bleeding through with his wolf.

“No,” Ford answered shortly, breaking eye contact to swap out a tool.

“I’ve been by her side a long while. You will not break her heart,” Lionel warned in a growl.

Ford might not have been an alpha, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t packing power. It took sheer willpower to keep his gaze on the engine in front of him and not rip out Lionel’s throat.

“I’m not going to harm her,” he ground out between clenched teeth, daring a glance at Lionel. But breaking her heart ... he didn’t know how to respond to that one.

“Good. Now I need you to take a look at our defenses at my place, no one can match your mechanical savvy,” Lionel ordered, once again maintaining eye contact with Ford.

Ford grunted, painfully tearing his chocolate gaze back in order to adjust a wire on the engine. “Tyler’s pack still in the area?” he asked.

“Yes, not to mention I have fucking witches roaming around. I can’t tell if they are real and packing power or just humans playing with candles. Either way, I want to be sure our defenses are ready,” Lionel grumbled, watching Ford work.

It was unspoken that Lionel disapproved of Ford living so far from the compound. The rest of the pack was within a 10-minute radius, but Ford never felt like he quite fit with this pack. Actually, he hadn’t felt he belonged in a long time, anywhere. He had hoped that transferring from the Wyoming pack to here would give him a fresh start.

“I’ll be there,” Ford confirmed, dropping the wrench into his toolbox.

...

Making my way out of the sticky heat, I breathed a sigh of relief in the shade of the garages, pushing my sunglasses up with a hand laden with food bags. A quick scan of the garage showed no Ford or Lionel. Shrugging, I headed to the office. Ford would show up for his food eventually. The man could eat, and not just food, wink.

“You think that’s wise?” a voice asked, jarring me out of my inappropriate thoughts as I approached the office door. I paused, my brow furrowed. Who the fuck was that?

“She’s my best friend,” Becca’s familiar voice answered, followed by a sigh. “She’s perfectly capable of watching the shop,” she clipped out.

“Hey, hey, I’m sorry. It’s just that Ford and I can watch the shop for you. Penni just got back. I’m sure there’s lots she doesn’t know.” The stranger softened his voice to Becca.

I rolled my eyes, fixing a welcoming smile on before turning the corner and knocking on the doorframe. “Becca!” I greeted her. “You should have told me y’all were stopping by, I would have gotten more food.”

She returned my overly friendly smile with a tight one of her own. “I’m just here for a minute,” she explained.

“How’s your dad?” I asked, ignoring the fair-haired man watching me warily.

She let out a punctuated sigh. “Not good, he’s under sedation again.”

“Oh, honey.” I dropped the food on the desk, going to give her a hug.

She cried, clutching to me. I took the moment to make eye contact with, I was assuming, Randy, giving him my best flat-pan, not-impressed, motherfucker stare.

Becca pulled back, wiping her red eyes. “Anyways, I just had to check an account for warranty information on a part. How’s it going here? Do you need any help?”

I smiled, looking at Randy while I answered her. “We’re good, sugar!” I turned my gaze back to her. “As long as you want me to help, I’m happy to. I’ve got half the unpaid invoices taken care of, got a refund from the bank and have been working on rebranding graphics.”

“You don’t have to do all that,” Becca said, casting a quick, meaningful look at the assumed Randy.

I smiled at her, squeezing her hand. “Anything you need, I’m here.”

She nodded. “Oh, this is Randy,” she offered, fluttering a hand to the man in question.

I turned. “I assumed. Randy, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Please know if you hurt my girl, I will find you, and I will castrate you.” I delivered that all smiling. Southern charm, y’all.

Becca laughed while Randy adjusted his junk protectively. “Good to know,” he finally managed. “Becca, I’ve gotta run.”

She nodded, “Let me walk you out.”

...

Ford fucking hated when Randy visited. They were in the same pack, and it drove him insane that Randy hadn’t told Becca he was a shifter.

“Have you told her best friend about you?” Randy demanded, unlocking his car. Becca had hugged him goodbye before heading back in to the office and the best friend in question.

“It’s a summer thing. She’ll leave to go back to school in a few months,” Ford defended himself with a shrug. He was unwilling to admit that a small part of him worried she would outright reject him if she knew, and given how attached his wolf was to her, he didn’t want to go there, at least not yet.

Randy shrugged. “Maybe, but I plan on telling Becca before it gets physical. Think of that. Oh, and don’t forget you have the dusk shift at Lionel’s.” He slammed the door on that pointed comment before flinging gravel in his retreat.

Ford growled, annoyed that Randy did have a point on things getting physical, and irritated because he certainly didn't need the reminder that it was his turn to run patrols around Lionel's.

With clenched fists, he took a moment, shaking his head, dispelling the negativity of Randy before heading inside and out of the heat. His shifter hearing picked up the girls talking softly in the office.

"I'm thinking of selling," Becca confessed.

"Why?" Penni asked, shock coloring her voice.

He heard Becca's distress. "I just don't know if I can do this and try and take care of Dad."

"I understand, but what about after your Dad?" Penni asked. God, the woman was blunt.

"What?" Becca asked.

"What happens when all this passes? Would you regret not having the garage? How are you planning on making money?" Penni rapid-fired.

"I, I don't know." Becca confessed.

"I'm here for the summer, I can make sure the place runs in your absence. If work gets too busy, we can bring on another mechanic. Either way, I got this and I've got you." Penni's conviction was absolute. He admired that steadfast confidence.

"Do you want any company tonight?" Penni asked.

Ford stifled a groan. He was hoping for a repeat of last night, and so was his wolf.

"You mind? I thought you and Ford would be at it like bunnies." Becca gave a tearful laugh.

...

I groaned, "Don't make me regret this offer." Just the thought of what had gone on last night had me clenching my thighs in eager anticipation.

Becca sighed. "I don't know, part of me just wants to be alone, but part of me wants to eat my weight in custard."

"Mmm, Bubba's?" My mouth was already salivating.

"Bubba's," she agreed with a nod and smile.

...

I strolled out onto the garage floor close to closing time. Becca had gone home shortly after making our plans to consume high-calorie custard.

"Hey handsome," I called out.

"Hand me the flat-head screwdriver," he demanded, not bothering to roll out from under the car he was working on.

I rummaged before finding the requested tool, tilting my head, a slow smile working on my lips. Setting down my bag and the screwdriver next to it, I hooked my hands into his dusty blue coveralls and pulled him out.

Straddling him, I sat down before retrieving the requested tool. "Sorry, did you say screw?" I asked.

...

Damn, that woman never disappointed.

Ford growled up at her, feigning annoyance while the growing erection between them said differently.

“You heard I’m going over to Becca’s,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” Ford answered, not exactly sure where this was going.

She leaned forward, placing a chaste kiss against his lips. “It’s adorable you are pouting, but there’s no need to be worried.” She shifted her weight, placing her hands on his chest, tilting her hips to rub against him.

Forgetting the grease and dirt on his hands, he nestled a hand into her soft locks, enjoying the low moan from her supple lips before he claimed her mouth. With his other hand slipping under her shirt to stroke the warm skin, he was wondering if he was addicted to her after one night.

He had told Randy it was only for the summer, and that already seemed too short.

She ended the kiss, breathing heavily, staring down into his dark eyes. “You’re bad,” she teased, standing.

He pushed onto an elbow. “You started it.”

Biting her lip, she let her gaze rove over the erection tenting his clothing.

“Wanna come finish it?” he asked, letting his heated gaze rove over those plush curves, hardly contained in her jeans.

“Gah, tomorrow night, or maybe after Becca’s!” she exclaimed before turning and leaving. Ford couldn’t complain about the view from the floor, either.

He groaned, sliding back under the car.

...

Ford left the shop shortly after Penni. He didn’t want to be late for his patrol shift and give Randy more shit to complain about. He groaned internally, walking to the back perimeter where Astrid was shifting forms.

She panted for a few breaths before standing and stretching. After decades of shifting, nudity didn’t bother Ford anymore, although he had a suspicion Astrid was trying to get his attention.

“How was the afternoon shift?” Ford asked.

Astrid shrugged, picking up her clothing from the back porch. “Uneventful, as usual. Tyler and his bastard wolves always attack at night.”

Ford sighed, “That they do.”

“What’s their issue with us, anyways?” Astrid asked, annoyed.

Ford shrugged. “They lack anything better to do than attack neighboring clans for more territory?”

Astrid huffed, “Those weak assholes aren’t getting one anthill of our land, that’s for damn sure.”

Ford nodded, toeing off his shoes before stripping. “Agreed.” He ignored Astrid’s longing stare, darting off into the woods once he had shifted.

The land around Lionel’s was ten acres of untouched woodlands, well, untouched except for the wolves that either called it home or patrolled it.

Ford's stomach growled at him. He gave thought to chasing down a rabbit that was foolish enough to show itself, but he resisted, keeping himself alert and combing through the territory. He often wondered the same thing as Astrid, why did Tyler and his gang of flunkies attack, and why only one or two at a time? If Lionel knew, he wasn't sharing.

He didn't think he'd see any action at dusk. The evening shift always saw the most shit, and that wasn't his shift this week. That was tragic, because he would have loved to tear apart a rival shifter. His massive espresso paws dented the soft earth, leaving behind his unnatural paw prints. Testing the air, he scented nothing but that damn rabbit taunting him.

Lowering his muzzle, he whooshed out a breath. Out of nowhere, a tan wolf slammed him into the ground. Smaller than Ford, the wolf snapped and snarled, landing a solid bite on Ford's flank. Ford yipped, scrambling to get his feet under him, snapping his massive head around to latch onto his attacker.

The tan wolf yipped and dug his teeth once more into the fur and flesh of Ford's side. Ford bucked in response, tossing their tangled bodies into a tree, hearing something crack. He briefly hoped it was his attacker, not just the tree. That gave him an idea, and he whirled around, flinging the tan wolf into as many trees as possible.

Finally, the fucker let go. Ford swayed on his paws before lowering his head and growling at the trespasser, who took a step back, then another, before turning tail and running back toward the border. Ford poured on the speed, his bleeding side reknitting but not yet healed, the muscles pulling with every leap.

Ford could feel his pack magic beginning to wane as he approached the border. With a snarl and a howl he skidded to stop, watching the tan wolf still loping in the distance. He didn't like his prey leaving, and his wolf was having an exceptionally difficult time understanding why his packmates weren't going after the intruder to tear out his throat.

With a final snarl, he turned back to Lionel's house or compound, depending on the day, to relay the news and get cleaned up.

Chapter 4

We had devoured our burgers from Bubba's and were swapping an Oreo custard between the two of us, watching *The Bachelor*.

"I can't believe he got his own show," I muttered.

"Agreed, but he is nice to watch," Becca commented with a shrug.

I mirrored the shrug. "Maybe, but as soon as he opens his mouth, all I want to do is duct tape it."

"Don't go sharing your fantasies with me," Becca laughed.

I chuckled, "Duct tape is not my weapon of choice."

Clearing her throat, Becca set the custard on the coffee table. "Can I ask you something?"

I rolled my eyes at the drama unfolding on the screen before turning to focus on her. "Woman, how long have you known me?"

She nodded. "Randy shut me down the other night for sex."

"Is he gay?" was my first response, and a valid response as well. Straight men love sex with hot chicks.

She fiddled with the blanket on her lap. "He seemed into it, but he said he didn't want to take advantage of me right now."

"How are you feeling about that?" I asked, knowing I'd be pissed if I were in her shoes. Or lack thereof, in this case.

She shrugged, "Not too great."

I nodded. "Rejection sucks, no matter the reason, and his does sound very caring."

She met my gaze. "You think?"

I nodded. "He's in it for the long haul, is my personal and professional opinion as a whore. If he was only after you to hit it, he would have, no qualms about the state of your life."

"He wanted to come over tonight," Becca admitted.

"You said no?" I asked.

"I said maybe later," Becca confessed.

I laughed, "I told Ford the same thing after I dry humped him in your shop."

"What?" Becca exclaimed, throwing a pillow at me. "I said no sex in the shop!"

"Dry humping isn't sex, nothing penetrated—to my great disappointment." I sighed with overdramatic flair.

She groaned, holding her head. "The last thing I need is a customer walking in on the two of you screwing like bunnies."

"Just think of the all the new business that would drum up! Lube service and a show." I laughed, tossing my head back.

She covered her face, then turned her eyes back to the TV before checking her phone. I smiled, a small pang of sadness creeping into my heart.

This was Becca's dream, married before 26, kids before 30, and a white picket fence, which she already had. It was perfect and beautiful and I wished passionately it would work out for her. But I knew her gaining a husband would put distance between us. Life was a collection of seasons, and my heart ached that ours was changing.

"I can't believe you are going to Texas after this," Becca complained.

I nodded. "I know. But the pay is unbelievable for a limited-experience graduate. They even help with housing for the first two months. It's a sweet gig to land."

Becca nodded, hogging the custard. I slapped her arm gently. "You are required to visit me."

She laughed, "I'm going to miss your no-nonsense approach at life."

I looked over at her. "Honesty has always been my best quality," I boasted, jacking the custard from her.

Becca huffed, "That and your unwavering self-confidence."

I laughed, "Some would say cocky."

Becca giggled. "Remember when they spray painted that on your locker?"

I laughed. "Best compliment ever."

...

"Oh my god, I'm going to have to hit the gym if I want my pants to fit in the morning," I complained.

Becca laughed, "You could always wear clothing that isn't skin tight."

"Naw, where's the fun in that?" I kissed her cheek. "Call Randy," I ordered, walking down her porch stairs.

"You calling Ford?" she yelled to my back.

I waved my cell phone at her, already lit up with his number.

Shaking her head, she turned back inside. "Love ya!" I yelled, closing my car door.

"Me or my cock?" Ford asked.

I laughed, taken off guard. "Do I have to choose?"

He rumbled, "Why don't you come over and we can show you exactly why you love us?"

Heat pooled between my legs. "Okay," I agreed, starting my car.

...

I all but ran up the damn steps at Ford's, which I would have been slightly embarrassed about if he hadn't been waiting for me, shirtless, sweats hung low on his hips. Tossing my purse on the floor, I launched myself into his arms.

"Miss me?" he rumbled against my lips.

"Maybe," I teased, nipping his bottom lip. He growled against my lips before a slow smile broke our kiss.

Tossing me onto his bed, don't ask me how we had gotten there so quickly, he hooked his fingers into my jeans, peeling them off. I wiggled to make it easier for him to work.

I tried to lean up but a solid hand on my stomach held me in place.

I huffed an annoyed sound as Ford pulled my ass to the edge of the bed before kneeling in front of me. I couldn't help the anticipation flooding my overheated body, nor the wiggles that demanded him.

"Eager much?" he asked, dropping a kiss on my inner thigh.

I growled my frustration at him. "I am not a patient person."

He had the nerve to laugh, running his dark stubble over the sensitive skin his lips had just teased. Firm teeth pinched near my hipbone and I yelped in surprise.

Just as quickly, his warm tongue slipped between my folds.

"Fucking yes!" I whispered in pleasure, my back arching, legs folding around him, pulling him closer. "More!" I demanded.

He pressed my legs down and I yielded, letting my muscles go limp as his thumb grazed the tightly bundled nerves in question.

I wiggled again, needing him desperately, in spite of spending the previous night with him. My feet flexed against him, trying to pull him closer. I'd probably have a better chance of moving a damn mountain.

I felt his breath against my clit before he moved off. I screamed in my frustration. He chuckled, pushing me down again when I raised up to shove his mouth where I wanted it.

As he trailed hot kisses from my stomach, I felt the rough pads of his fingers part my slick folds, his pained groan ending his kisses, his mop of brown hair resting against my thigh as he pushed two fingers inside of me.

He looked up at me as my fingers interlaced through his soft hair. He kept my gaze, his free hand stretching up to take my own before he slipped out, and back inside, deftly hitting just the right spot.

My legs flexed and I whimpered when he repeated the motion.

"More," I begged. Releasing my hand, he looked up at me once before his lips closed around my clit. My hips bucked as his teeth grazed in time with his fingers and I was coming un-fucking-done.

His smooth tongue flattened to assuage the earlier friction, his speed increasing between my legs, my body moving and writhing while he strummed it in perfect rhythm to a tune I didn't know I needed.

Then he did it. He growled against my clit while ramping up his speed between my thighs to levels of perfection.

I screamed as my climax crashed over me, stars blinding my vision, aftershocks shaking my body in delicious release.

"Holy fuck, Ford," I whispered, laying an arm across my eyes.

...

Ford was poised, standing, watching Penni panting, his own breathing mirroring hers. The blood flow pounded into his erection to the point of pain.

He wanted her, wanted to feel the slick juices that coated his tongue gliding around his girth.

Flopping her arm back, she pushed onto her elbows, a sleepy, satisfied smile on her ravished lips. Her hazel gaze roved over him, stopping on the jutting manhood he had been absently stroking.

“Fucking hell, Ford.” Her gaze shifted up to his dark chocolate one. “I should be spent, wanting to curl up like a cat and sleep, but watching you there, touching yourself, makes me hot, so damn hot. Get inside of me now,” she demanded.

He didn’t waste a fucking second, nor did his wolf, jumping onto the bed, admiring her beautiful gaze while she crawled back, laying her head onto the pillow, their sex-capades having taken place on the dusty blue comforter over his bed.

Her fingertips trailed over his jawline. “I need you, Ford, you’ve stolen my self-control. All I know is I need you inside of me. I need to feel you stretch me and cum inside of me.”

Lowering his head down, he kissed her, holding nothing back, granting the beast that constantly rode him more freedom than he should. With a thrust, he gave her what she needed, a low guttural groan stilling their kiss for only a moment before it was renewed. He planted one hand by her head, the other cupping the back of her neck, controlling the kiss and the speed.

The second her ankles slipped onto his shoulders, he moved deeper within her.

The noise she made was bordering on pain, and he pulled back. “Baby?” he questioned.

She nodded, speech clearly beyond her, and he thrust again. He shifted back, his hands holding firmly to her calves, before groaning and moving inside of her again.

...

Ford pressed delicate kisses against my ankles, hooked over his shoulders, while his hips drove a rhythm that danced with the border of painful. But he always kept me on the side of blissful pleasure.

My body tightened and I reached for him. Pulling my legs toward me in an impressive feat of flexibility, my mouth reached his as his hands scooped up fistfuls of my blond hair. I gave in to him, gave up control and just felt. I felt like a woman possessed, a woman cherished, and dammit all to hell, loved.

...

Penni’s breathing was labored, small whispers of pleasure building to the scream that flexed her tight muscles against his hardened length. He shuttered his last few thrusts, overcome with wild pleasure until he cried out and emptied himself into her.

...

It was late and I was tired, even after the few hours of passed out, exhausted sex sleep I had nabbed against Ford.

Rolling onto my back, I rubbed my eyes, heaving a sigh. I should get up and go home, I knew. I didn’t think ahead to bring a bag, and my mouth had a funk going on in it.

Lifting the covers to slip my legs down, I felt Ford’s muscular arm rip me back to his side.

He growled.

I wiggled again, standing in one fluid motion. I watched him for a moment as he pulled a pillow under his arm before settling down. He was a fine male figure, the planes of his back etched by muscles refined and honed by hard labor.

I was leaving, and I had to make it quick before I woke him up to demand another round of orgasms.

...

Back at home, I showered lazily, not bothering to wash my hair as I scrubbed the day away. A stickiness on my inner thigh stopped me, stilling my movements and my breathing.

Had we used protection?

Shit.

Fuck.

SHIT!

I didn't remember. I couldn't recall foil being ripped or a moment of waiting. I just knew the sex had been mind blowing, epic, had left my knees shaking. Leaning my face heavily against the cream shower tiles, I covered my mouth, attempting to control my breathing.

What if I got pregnant?

What if I was pregnant RIGHT fucking NOW?

There was the day-after pill, but that thought left my stomach feeling ill. I wasn't going to stop a baby before it even had a chance. What if Ford didn't want to be part of that baby's life? I sat down in the shower, the spray on my shoulders forgotten, drawing my knees to my chest.

What if I was a single parent just like my mom had been? Would I be enough for a baby? I was not fucking ready for kids, not at all. I was too selfish, too wild. I needed to be free of caring for another being for a little while longer, or maybe a lot longer, hell I didn't know.

Around and around my thoughts circled, until the water turned cold and I dragged myself out to toss and turn in bed.

Chapter 5

Ford had seen more than a few women look wrecked after a night with him. But both his eyes and the scent on the air told him that there was something darker behind Penni's heavy steps when she stumbled into the shop at 9 a.m.

"Hey," he greeted her cautiously as he talked with a customer in the bays.

"We need to talk," she said before rambling off to the office, rubbing her eyes.

His brow furrowed as he watched her turn the corner. He quickly took in the customer's complaints about the car, promising to call before the end of the day to update him.

...

I was certain that sometime during the brief two hours and twenty minutes of sleep I'd managed, my eyelids had been replaced with sandpaper. I sat down with a groan before turning the computer on.

Before long, Ford stood in the doorway. "You alright?" he asked cautiously.

"Can you come in and close the door?" I asked.

He tried a smile. "Thought I wasn't allowed in."

I stood, shoving him in and slamming the door before rounding on him with crossed arms.

"Did we use a condom last night?" I hissed at him, the thread of fear flowing through me expressing itself as being pissed the fuck off.

...

"Shit, no, we didn't," he admitted. He had been so consumed with her, so entranced, the thought of protection had never entered his mind.

"I'm clean," she stated, meeting his gaze unflinchingly.

"Me too," he replied easily. Shifters didn't get sick, or carry diseases.

"And I'm not going to take the day-after pill," she informed him, refusing to drop her gaze.

A child was an outcome Ford hadn't thought of. "I don't think I can have kids," he confessed. "I've tried, and..." He shrugged, letting that train of thought fade into the distance. For him to impregnate a human was possible, but highly unlikely.

Attempting to lighten the mood, he smiled, wrapping his arms around her. "That doesn't mean I don't want babies, though. If we have one, I'll gladly take care of you both." Pulling back, he smoothed the tear that threatened to slip down her cheek. "But I doubt that's happening, so you have nothing to worry about."

...

I was going to pass out. I was certain of it.

I nodded at his beautiful words, dammit.

"Is that why you left last night?" he questioned.

I shook my head, sitting on Becca's couch, needing the support as the fear lingered. He said it wasn't likely, though. Maybe he was right and there was no need to worry.

"I left because I didn't want to run home in the morning." I met his gaze. "I didn't think about us not using a condom until I was showering."

Ford blew out a sigh. He sat next to me, interlacing our hands. "So, we still can't hump at work?"

I laughed, grateful he was being so easy about all of this, giving him a playful push. "Get back to the cars," I told him, standing and moving behind the desk.

"'Cause I'm just sayin', I'm down for trying to impregnate you over and over and over again," he teased with a wink.

I rubbed my hands over my tired face. "You're horrid."

"That is not what you said last night," he reminded me.

"Out!" I chided, laughing.

As I watched Ford walk away, a heavy weight felt lifted. I didn't doubt a single thing he said. I knew that however unlikely it was to happen, he'd stick by me and our potential baby, no matter what.

Down, smushy feeling, down.

...

The voices of Becca and Randy penetrated my dulled brain cells. I massaged my temple for a moment, looking away from the website I was tweaking, debating on going out there. But getting up required too much effort. Eventually they would come in, or not. I didn't much care.

...

Becca nodded at Ford, pleased with his update. "I'm going to check on Penni."

Randy stayed behind, and both he and Ford waited until she greeted Penni to speak.

"You coming by Lionel's tonight?" Randy asked.

Ford tossed his stained maroon rag over his shoulder, turning back to the car he was working on.

"Yeah, Lionel needs a second pair of eyes on his mechanical security," Ford acknowledged.

Randy nodded. "You tell her yet?"

Ford growled, not turning around. "Yeah, me either," Randy admitted.

Ford turned at that, crossing his arms, watching Randy shove his hands into his jeans pockets, sensing there was more coming.

Randy kicked a pebble across the concrete floor. "I asked Lionel if I could bring Becca tonight."

Ford's eyes widened. "No shit?"

Randy met his gaze for only a moment before their wolves roared to the surface. With practiced blinks, their gazes slid away at the same time.

"You thinking of turning her?" Ford asked, busying himself with organizing his tools.

“No ... yes,” Randy sighed. Ford peeked back to see him running a hand through his light hair. “I don’t know. Everything is different with her. My wolf is stronger, calmer—I don’t know exactly how to describe it. But, have you heard about Logan and Olivia?”

Ford shrugged; he knew bits and pieces of that story. Randy continued, stepping closer and dropping his voice. “He bit her, while fucking, and he made her part of the pack.”

“Is she a shifter now?” Ford asked, surprised. He supposed if he paid more attention to shifter politics, he’d know.

“No, she’s still a succubus. Apparently, she has an immunity to being turned, but she’s pack. They say she smells like pack, can give orders like an alpha, and even taps into the bonds.” Randy tapped his temple to emphasize the bond they all shared.

“Wow,” was all Ford could come up with as he stared down at his tools. Imagine it, a mate that wasn’t a shifter and didn’t have to be turned. “But Becca is human,” Ford pushed.

Randy nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. “It may change her, it may only mark her.”

“You’re willing to take the risk?” Ford asked, making eye contact for just a moment before looking away.

Randy shrugged. “I want to, but only if she does.” He let out a drawn sigh, clearly at odds with himself, leaning against the car Ford was working on.

“What did Lionel say?” Ford ventured.

“No. Until I tell her, she needs to stay away.” Randy’s face fell.

Ford nodded. “They can keep each other company.”

“I was thinking of taking them to Howler after,” Randy offered.

“You gotta be kidding! The shifter bar?” Ford was shocked. It was a clever workaround for Lionel’s order, but he wasn’t sure he wanted Penni there. His wolf certainly didn’t want her in danger or around other potential shifter fuck buddies.

“It’s a shifter-human bar,” Randy clarified with a shrug. “It might be a good gauge to see how open Becca is to shifter life. I’m after the long haul with her.” Randy left unspoken that Ford wasn’t with Penni. It grated on him, but he didn’t dwell on it.

“Well, I can ask Penni, too, make a double date of it,” Ford suggested, equally curious to see what her reaction would be.

Randy nodded. “Becca would be more comfortable with Penni there. I damn say there isn’t a situation that girl can’t handle.”

Ford nodded, a smile tugging at his lips.

“PENNI!” he hollered.

“WHAT?” she yelled back, sticking her head out of the office. “Becca is staying firm on the no sex at work policy. I already asked.”

He and Randy laughed.

“Wanna go on a double date, pending Becca agrees?”

“Yes!” she squealed, jumping up and down.

...

Ford adjusted the springs on the weight sensor at the edge of Lionel's property. The dark woods called to him, and he was certain a run was in order before he met up with Randy, who was back at the house.

"I still say an actual bear trap would be better," Lionel grumbled.

"The damage definitely would be, but then you risk hurting an actual bear."

"Pfft, none come this way with our scents," Lionel scoffed.

"Probably not, but I'll be damned if I'm helping you lug a five-hundred-pound bear back to camp, and secondly, if these are just humans playing with candles, the police will not look kindly upon maiming and potentially killing one of them."

Lionel growled in response, boiling with frustration that Ford felt through the pack bonds.

Ford cast a look back at his alpha, silently crouched down, watching and listening to the woods. "You thinking of calling the Council?"

Lionel huffed, "Why? So they can stick their noses in where they don't belong?"

"Because they're damn good at snuffing out witches." Knowing there was a limit to how hard he should push, Ford didn't add, *and figuring out territory disputes* as he moved on to the next sensor. Even as little as he paid attention to such things, he had heard that much.

"The Supernatural Council charges. I want to be sure we can't handle it first," Lionel finally offered.

"What about the Southern Alpha?" Ford asked.

"I wouldn't allow these questions if we weren't in private," Lionel warned.

Ford shrugged. "This equipment costs plenty, and we are in private," he reminded him.

Lionel let out a long exhale, standing and moving forward a step. "It's true, we technically fall under the Southern Compass Alpha, but he's the U.S. Alpha's brother, so I'm treading lightly."

Ford nodded, not pushing his luck. "Have you thought about adding cameras?"

"I have, but I don't know what they'd pick up that the scouts can't." Lionel crossed his arms, looking unhappily into the distance. "It may just be those damn wolves from the north sending something or someone new to fuck with us. They've had a burr up their ass since I killed their beta when he wandered onto our territory."

"What happened there?" Ford asked out of curiosity.

"It's a long story. The short of it is, I claimed one of their prior packmates after they made him a lone wolf, and the beta came to collect, bloodily." Lionel looked off into the distance, clearly replaying some of that exchange.

Ford watched Lionel, noting the tension in his square jaw. Making someone a lone wolf was an extreme measure packs could use; typically, death was dealt out as a kinder punishment than exile. Wolves were natural pack animals. As a loner, the chances of going pure beast and insane were high. Most would choose death.

"Apparently, they have a long memory," Ford commented, not sure what to add. "Who was the wolf?"

"Apparently," Lionel agreed, before setting his alpha gaze on Ford. "Randy."

Ford slipped from his crouch to sitting on his ass. “Randy?” he asked, shocked.

“Yes, pain-in-the-ass Randy. He found out the pack was doing some not-so-good shit, and once they had severed his pack ties, he beat hell down here. Took out four wolves on his way.”

Ford stood, brushing his ass off. “Four?” he repeated.

Lionel nodded. “He’s a ruthless fighter.”

Ford nodded, still mildly in shock.

...

Ford had run with the pack, including Randy, trying not to look at him differently. Having only been a part of the pack for a short time and as its newest member, Ford understood the need for privacy. As they were getting dressed after shifting back, Randy’s phone pinged.

“The girls moved to Becca’s place. Apparently, Tim was becoming an issue,” Randy said as they walked to their cars.

Ford growled low. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

Randy shrugged. “Just be on time. I have to run a shift tonight after Howler.”

Ford nodded, slamming the door of his truck and peeling out.

...

“Where is he?” I groaned, sipping on my wine. Pre-party, don’t judge. At least we’d eaten a hearty dinner of pasta, meatballs, and breadsticks.

“I’m sure he won’t be much longer,” Randy said.

He had barely finished the sentence when Ford’s truck pulled up to the curb.

“He’s arrived!” I yipped, jumping up to slip on my shoes and go out to greet him.

Just about tearing Becca’s door off, I stumbled down the stairs before throwing myself into his big, strong arms, planting a kiss against wicked lips.

“You taste good,” he muttered, nibbling my bottom lip.

“Wine,” I explained. “You’re late. Now let’s go par-tay!” I exclaimed.

...

Ford nestled her close, knowing tomorrow wouldn’t go well.

...

The lights were blurry at Howler. Laughing at something dumb Randy had said, Becca and I leaned heavily on each other in the sticky booth. The music seemed weirdly quiet for a club, but it was a nice change of pace, not having to yell to be heard over throbbing speakers. The boys both seemed very relaxed, and I wasn’t sure whether all their nods to the surrounding patrons were from polite acknowledgement or actually knowing them.

Either way, I was too drunk to care. I wiggled out of the booth to wrap my arms around Ford’s waist, tucking my head under his chin. He held me up, and I was a drunk girl clinging to her man. Well, nothing like owning the stereotype.

While Ford and Randy chatted, my gaze wandered over to the bar.

He growled before leaning down and capturing my mouth in a soul-searing surprise kiss.

I leaned into him, tasting the beer he'd been sipping as his tongue rubbed against mine, mirroring what my body was doing against his. Ford turned, pinning me against the table, hands braced on either side of me.

My eyes stayed closed for a few extended moments before I bit my lip, dreamily looking up at him.

He waved my empty drink in front of me. "Water?" he mouthed.

I nodded and he walked off to get more. Becca, also inebriated, bumped into me. Putting her mouth close against my ear, she all but yelled, "Let's dance some of this off."

I nodded, groggily wincing at her volume. Following her onto the large and busy dance floor, I focused on keeping myself upright. I did need to burn off some of the alcohol. Howler was an hour drive from our sleepy town and was rumored to be a shifter and human hang out. The website didn't confirm the rumors, but the drinks were exceedingly strong.

Becca dragged me into an open section before we found the rhythm pulsing around us. Lazily, I hung my arms on her, her hands on my hips as we danced together.

...

Ford watched the girls dance under the changing lights, his gaze fixed on Penni, the way she easily moved, seductive and relaxed.

Randy bumped his arm and his smile fell away. "What?" Ford growled, turning to look at him.

Randy pointed to another area on the dance floor, where Lionel was pushing a man into a hallway. Instantly, they were both in motion, tromping down the stairs and into the darkened hallway Lionel had just passed through.

Bursting through double metal doors, they found Lionel locked in combat with the unknown man.

"Check on the girls, Randy!" Lionel yelled, seeing their arrival.

"Why didn't you call us?" Ford growled, stepping down the concrete stairs, ready to join the battle.

Lionel shoved off his attacker. "I don't need help," he replied in a growl.

Ford couldn't deny that. Lionel had a thin slice in his forehead, but his attacker was limping, blood trickling down from a deep gash on his cheek.

Lionel's attacker spat out, "Oh, come on Lionel, don't you want to share with your pack why we are after your throat?" He sucked in a strained breath before lunging at him again.

He landed a solid hit to Lionel's side and Ford pushed off the stair railing he was leaning on, ready to interfere if needed.

"Shut up, Tyler," Lionel growled, lunging forward to head butt Tyler's jaw.

Tyler stepped back, rubbing where Lionel had bounced off his wounded cheek. "Don't want your pack to know the whole truth, huh?"

"There's nothing to tell!" Lionel launched at Tyler, his force renewed.

Tyler spat out blood. "Nothing to tell?"

Tyler was ready for Lionel's attack that time.

"Fucking Randy, my beta, you took him after we exiled him," he spat. "Disgusting, the lot of you. But we got some help now." Tyler hardly had a moment to get the words out before Lionel launched a fresh wave of attacks.

Blood dripped from a wound above Tyler's, but he only laughed.

The back door opened, drawing Ford's attention there. "We good?" Randy asked.

Ford turned back to where Tyler had been, finding the spot vacant.

They both looked at Lionel. "Why didn't you kill him?" Ford demanded.

Lionel shook his head. "He's not wrong. I did take Randy from him."

Randy cleared the steps. "After I was exiled. He's a monster. We need to end their entire clan."

Ford watched their interactions for a moment longer before heading back in to check on the girls.

...

I awoke to a warm, solid arm around my middle and a splitting headache.

"I'm never drinking again," I whined, clutching my head.

Ford chuckled softly, reaching over me to grab a glass of water and ibuprofen. "You will drink this, however," he murmured, shifting me to my back.

Wiggling up gingerly, I took a small sip. "Ugh, I'm going to pee and then go back to bed."

I made good on my words, heading to the bathroom.

After washing my hands, I splashed cold water over my face and used Ford's mouthwash before going back to bed. He wasn't there and I lacked the energy to find him, or my phone, or my wallet.

...

Hours or maybe days later, I tromped down the stairs, still groggy and trying not to throw up the nonexistent contents of my stomach. I found Ford in the kitchen, playing on his phone.

"Hey," he greeted me with a smile.

"Food," I grunted at him, sitting down at the middle bar stool, still holding my head.

"As you command," Ford grunted. I sensed I had offended him in my hung-over state. I'm not totally sure I cared.

Ford took out leftover pizza, heating it in the microwave before sliding a plate in front of me.

"Was Lionel there last night?" I asked, rubbing my forehead.

"Why do you ask that?" Ford said, taking a bite of his slice.

I shook my head, regretting the action. "I thought I saw him there."

Ford nodded. "He made a brief appearance," he agreed.

I grunted and forced down a few bites.

"I'm going to head home," I told him, going to gather my belongings.

Ford walked me to my car, holding my hand, rubbing small circles over a knuckle. His mind was clearly elsewhere—like far, far elsewhere—and I wondered if my summer fling was coming to a screeching halt. Fuck, that was going to suck. The sex was fantastic.

...

My dreary worry kept me company all the way back to my mom's place. I tossed my bag on my bed before tromping down the hall to the bathtub.

Rummaging under the sink, I found my Christmas present of homemade bath bombs and dropped a lavender one into the running hot water. Scrolling my playlist, I hit play on soft jazz before stripping out of my day-old clothing.

Sinking into the warm water, I felt the muscles in my shoulders relax. I propped a towel behind my head and eased out a trapped breath in a whoosh.

I was definitely laying off drinking for a while, at least a week. Alright, that might be a little excessive.

I cracked an eye at the knock at the door. "Yeah?" I asked, wondering now if I'd locked it. Tim was wandering around here somewhere, although the house had seemed quiet when I got back.

My mom opened the door. "Hey Momma," I said, sinking back into the water, grateful for the bubbles.

"I didn't expect you back," she said, sitting on the rose plush toilet cover.

"Need me to get gone?" I asked with a heavy sigh.

"No, no darlin'. I just wanted to be sure everything was alright."

I nodded, my mind pulled back to thoughts of Ford. "Hopefully," I told her, with a we-will-see half smile.

She nodded, patting my twisted bun before leaving. "I'm going to haul trash out, don't get too prune in there," she teased.

I sighed, closing my eyes, letting my shoulders relax, the tension draining away with soft melodies.

Another knock on the door had me groaning. "Can't a girl get any peace?" I yelled at the door.

Tim stuck his head in, his eyes pursuing my exposed goods. Alarm bells blared.

"Get. Out." I kept my voice level. Never show predators fear. Ever.

Slowly, his dilated eyes finished taking in their super un-consensual peep show and met my gaze. I was careful not to move.

"Wow," he responded.

"Get. Out." I repeated. Clearly, this bath was my worst idea ever. Damn a girl for wanting to relax.

"Oh, come on." He moved a step closer, taking another long look at my naked flesh. "Just think of the fun we can have."

"No." My voice was firm and low. I was already cataloging weapons. So far, toilet lid was my best bet, although getting to it would be difficult. The hall bath wasn't huge, and the maneuver would certainly give him time to grab me.

"What, no revenge sex on the boyfriend who kicked you out?" he fake pouted, complete with bottom lip pushed out and mock crying. "Come on, you know I'll do you right," he smiled, reaching down to unbutton his pants.

I let out a disgusted snarl. “One, I don’t do boyfriends. Two, I don’t do my Mom’s sloppy seconds, and three, are you fucking hard of hearing? GET OUT!” Apparently, that shocked him out of whatever the fuck state he was in, and he took a step back.

“Fucking whore, you’re too damn loose for me, anyways!” he spat before slamming the door.

“That’s why they invented kegels!” I yelled at the closed door, the rose porcelain tub digging into my fingers as I clung to it.

Worst bath ever.

...

I gave thought to wallowing in my room, but in the end made it out to watch Lionel’s softball team. My mother hadn’t taken my warnings about Tim seriously, at all. It was grinding on my nerves and forcing me to seriously think about finding somewhere else to stay. But it was my home, and I was loath to let a creeper win.

I clapped as one of the girls rounded third base, letting out a holler. Lionel clapped, too, adjusting his yellow Hornets cap as he congratulated the smiling girl who had smacked a home run.

With a few more runs, the Hornets took home a win.

Lionel came and found me after the girls had cleared out, heading to the local pizza joint.

“You comin’ along to celebrate?” he teased.

I smiled. “While pizza does sound amazing, I’ll pass.”

He nodded, slipping off the Hornets hat. “Everything okay?” he asked. I pretended I didn’t see him carefully analyzing my expressions and body language.

I shrugged. “No,” I answered softly. Standing, I sighed, “but I’ll take care of it.”

Lionel caught my wrist and I met his gaze. He seemed torn, anguished about something. “Anything you want to talk about?”

I shrugged, pulling my keys out of my purse and my wrist out of his grasp. “I guess I expected things to stay the same.” I sighed, shaking my head, giving him a shaky laugh. “Anyways, great game, I’ll catch ya later.”

But the more I analyzed the situation with my mom and Tim, the more I realized things actually were just the same. I wasn’t. What had once passed as acceptable no longer was, and while that was clearly a good thing, moving into this new season of my life was proving sorrowful.

Lionel watched me leave, still rooted in place. I cast him a final glance and halfhearted wave before driving away, I wasn’t certain where.

I ended up at Bubba’s, picking at my French fries and mindlessly scrolling through my phone. Ford hadn’t texted or called, although I had started a few messages to him that I instantly deleted.

Sitting back in the booth with a huff, I willed the strength to go home and show Tim once and for all what he was messing with.

...

I parked in the gravel driveway, pausing as I got out of my car. They were fighting, loudly. I groaned, closing the car door. Maybe I could sneak in the back. I did so and made it unmolested to my bed after

triple checking that I'd locked the door. Lying on my side and checking my phone one last time, I drifted off.

...

The morning started the same way the evening had gone. Fighting. Slamming doors, crashing of something. I packed my very unused hiking backpack and fled the place in favor of an under-nurtured love for the outdoors, leaving through the back, again.

Fresh air and some alone time were exactly what I needed to figure out my next steps as far as my mom was concerned. I wasn't sure I was ready to tackle how I felt about Ford and his suddenly short answers, or my nagging gut telling me I was missing something.

Securing my ponytail through my dusty Hornets ball cap, I tucked my keys in my back pocket and headed for a trail I had been meaning to do for a while. It was a long hike, longer than any trail I'd ever tackled, and I never seemed to have the time.

Adjusting my straps, I set off. I had the time today.

...

Ford looked over the sensors at Lionel's place, then back to the bloodstained earth in front of them.

"They're not humans playing with candles," Lionel growled.

Ford shook his head. "Did you check the footage?" He was glad Lionel had followed his suggestion to augment his security.

"I did," Lionel clipped out.

"And?"

"Nothing except a blast of light," Lionel said, running a hand over his days-old stubble, "and a dead body."

Ford met the alpha's gaze, worry playing across both their features. Randy padded through the forest on four silent feet and they both turned their attention to him. With white fur streaked with blacks and browns, he was massive, even for a shifter. His shaking head said that he hadn't found anything, either.

"Any idea who she is?" Ford asked.

Lionel shook his head, his gaze rooted to the dark-haired stranger with her throat torn out, fear etched forever on her delicate skin.

"She smells human," Ford said quietly.

"I know. Someone wants us to deal with law enforcement," Lionel rumbled.

"Will we?" Ford asked, not adding that it was probably Tyler and his pack, who had apparently recruited witches to help with their poorly formed plans for revenge. Nor was he going to add that killing and dumping a human on their lands was certainly upping the game and warranted a call to the Council.

Sighing dejectedly, Lionel turned around, beginning the trek back to his home.

"Yes, she could have family out there looking for her," Lionel muttered, clearly at odds with his morally sound decision.

Ford nodded, thankful he wasn't going to have to hide a body. While he knew it was occasionally a necessity in their lives, something about this killing just felt off. Crouching down, he examined the olive green vest and button-down sky blue shirt. Both bore the insignia of hikers' gear. He moved down to her legs, reaching for a stick to pull moleskin off the bottom of her bare foot.

Be careful, Randy warned in his head.

Ford chose to ignore that. How could a witch body-dump a hiker out here, without tire tracks or a scent to follow?

He stood up, flexing his hands, not even a little certain where to go from here.

...

This hike suucccked. It was hot. It was fucking summer in Alabama. What the hell was wrong with me? My only saving grace was the lush trees and well-planned water stations. And bug spray, thank goodness I hadn't skimped on that necessity. I collapsed at one o'clock onto a well-used wooden bench with a groan. What was I thinking? I may have been in perfect shape to fuck all night, but I was in no shape to take on a nine-mile round trip hike.

Let's be honest, though, it was still better than having to deal with my mom and Tim. I sighed. If luck was on my side, she'd have him out tonight. One could only hope.

After refilling my water, I heaved myself up. Another mile, and I'd be at the top for some breathtaking views and a historical marker—so the sign had claimed. And after all this, it had better fucking deliver.

...

Ford chuckled off his clothing, shifting into a wolf. Randy chuckled, *I didn't miss anything, bro.*

Didn't say you did, Ford groaned back as his back realigned. Randy huffed and continued after Lionel.

Ford's wolf was the color of wet coffee grounds, flecked with patches of cinnamon. It was perfect camouflage for the thick woods. As he looked over the scene with his wolf's sight, he didn't see anything different. Sniffing around the area, he paused, tilting his large head. What would be the closest hiking trail to here?

Adjusting his course, he took off at a loping gait to Melbrook Mountain and Historical Park.

...

I hadn't encountered another soul on the trail. You know why? Cause it was freaking HOT outside! I was drenched, my hat brim and front panel saturated in salty goodness. Not to mention my bra, which was rubbing uncomfortably against my collarbone. But I had done it, reached the top, taken the token selfie, and now was on my way to the car and a shower. And food, lots and lots of food.

My phone rang in my back pocket. Surprised I had service, I picked up.

"Hey Becca," I huffed.

"You're hiking?" she asked, clearly having seen my selfie.

"I am."

"Why?" she asked.

"Cause things got weird with Ford, and real shitty at home," I answered honestly.

“What happened with Ford?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I guess I drank too much, but I feel like something is off.”

“Yeah, I hear ya. What about home?” Becca asked.

“Tim walked in on me in the bath and—it wasn’t good,” I answered, my voice softening as I remembered my fear and resolve.

“You should have called,” Becca scolded.

“I’m a big girl, I can take care of myself,” I reminded her. Besides, she had a budding romance with Randy, hopefully without the careful omission of facts I was currently dealing with.

“Right, but Randy has been out all day with work stuff, I could have come with you. No, scratch that, why would I do that? It’s hot outside!”

“I know,” I groaned.

Becca laughed, “Come over after you—never mind, come over when you are done.”

“Thanks, sis,” I said, meaning it.

“But your sweaty ass isn’t sitting on my furniture and you are not wearing my underwear.”

I laughed, “I have no issues with commando.”

...

Ford froze when he heard Penni’s voice on the mountain. What was she doing here? Crouching closer in the undergrowth, he tracked her, listening to her complain about Tim. His gut dropped as her voice dipped and she explained what had happened.

Witches forgotten, Ford was going to murder that man. Slowly, painfully, brutally. His vision clouded red with all the vicious ways he could inflict pain upon the piece of shit. Shaking his head, he looked up the mountain, internally debating if he should escort her down and then go back up the mountain to check for clues.

She should be fine, he tried to reassure himself, and he had left her on her own this weekend, after all. But it ate at him knowing there was tension between them. He liked Penni, a lot. He supposed it had only been days since they’d met, but he still felt she was his responsibility. So he followed her down, internally laughing at all her complaining about the heat.

Penni paused in front of a sign, looking at the paths and then back at the sign. “I think I came this way,” she muttered, forging off on the left path.

Ford inhaled deeply, a low growl rumbling from his throat. There was trouble this way. Penni continued on, unaware anything had changed. Ford followed the scent, prepared to eliminate the threat to her. It wasn’t long before he found the cause of the scent that troubled him, just off the path.

Ford circled around the witches’ construction, not understanding a damn thing. It should reek with the blood he could see from the dismembered deer carcass, but all he could scent was a mild unpleasantness, and he would almost say that was from the people, not the mess left behind.

He huffed and called for Randy. *I found the witches’ circle, I think, but I can’t make heads or tails of it.*

Stay there, we are on our way to you with help, Randy thought back.

Ford turned his head, following Penni's steps from afar with his exceptional hearing. She didn't run into any trouble, and he breathed a sigh of relief when her car pulled away.

It wasn't long before he was joined by Lionel, Randy and an overweight, balding man who was sweating badly.

Lionel examined the circle as Ford had done. "Why doesn't it smell?" Lionel wondered aloud.

"Any thoughts on the matter, Larry?" Randy asked of the man who was doing his best to remain inconspicuous.

"A few, yes." Larry cleared his throat. "It may have a containment spell on it, plus an aversion spell. I noticed neither of you breached the circle," he finished, attempting to pull himself straight after delivering such an observation.

Lionel extended his hand before following it with his body, stepping over the black circle outline. The smell washed over them immediately. Larry turned white, Randy swore and Ford hacked, the sudden rush of intense scents affecting him the most in his wolf form.

Jaw clenched, Lionel went forward, bending down to examine the deer carcass.

"They harvested the heart and wasted the rest. Why would they do that?" Lionel asked Larry.

Larry remained speechless, his eyes darting over the circle. Randy gave him a not-so-gentle shove. "Oh, right, many reasons ... the heart contains power. It's thought, magically, to be where one's magical memories are stored."

"And a deer?" Lionel pressed.

Larry shrugged. "The power gained couldn't have warranted the circle or obtaining the deer."

Lionel sighed, "I was afraid of that."

"Why, what do you think it means?" Larry asked.

Randy shoved him again.

"That this was just a warm-up, and they're building up to bigger sacrifices," Lionel responded, grinding his jaw. "I just wish I knew who, and why."

Ford hacked again, and so did Lionel. Damn witches.

"So, does this absolve me of my debt to the pack?" Larry asked.

"No," Randy and Lionel answered unison.

...

Ford shifted with a groan back at Lionel's place, taking a moment to gather his thoughts in human form. He looked up, seeing Randy texting on his phone.

"Don't," he said hoarsely, his toes realigning.

Randy raised an eyebrow. "Don't what?"

"Go over to Becca's."

"Why the fuck not?" Randy demanded.

“Penni is there and I gotta fix some shit before she can leave,” Ford explained, quickly donning his clothing.

Randy’s phone chimed. “Oh,” he said disappointedly. “Fallout from the club?” he asked, morose.

“Kinda, but mainly one other issue I plan on fixing.”

“What issue are you planning on fixing?” Lionel asked, stepping onto his back porch.

Ford cleared his throat. “Tim is becoming a problem for Penni.” Lionel would know who Tim was, he figured, since he and Penni were close.

Lionel grunted, gold peering from beneath his gaze for just a moment. “I thought something was off with her yesterday,” he muttered, mostly to himself, before running a hand over his face.

He fixed Ford with a pointed stare. “What are you planning on doing?”

“Payin’ him a visit,” Ford said, thick arms crossed over his puffed-up chest.

“So you know where she lives?” Randy asked, a cocky smile begging to be erased on his asshole face.

Ford grunted, “No, but I’m sure I can find someone who does.”

He looked pointedly back at Lionel, who sighed heavily.

“Where is she now?” Lionel asked.

“Becca’s,” Ford and Randy answered in unison.

“I’ll text you her address, don’t make me regret this. And we are all going over there for dinner on Friday,” Lionel said, going back inside the house.

“Yeah, it’d be great if you could get your girlfriend back to your place,” Randy demanded.

Ford growled. “They’re best friends. I don’t know why you are trying to get in between them.”

“Penni’s young and immature, not to mention obnoxiously loud,” Randy sneered.

“She’s unafraid of being exactly who she is. Why the fuck do you care?” Ford demanded.

Randy shook his head. “She’s not someone one who blends in. She stands out.”

“Why the fuck does that matter, Randy?”

He bristled, standing up straighter. “We survive by blending in, not by drawing attention to ourselves. You’ve seen what the wolves who have revealed themselves have to deal with. It’s good she’s just for the summer; she’s not pack material.” He turned and stormed away.

Ford growled at the high-handed asshole, fighting the need to step forward and beat some respect into him.

...

The drive to Penni’s house did nothing to curb Ford’s irritation. If anything, he was even more tempted to kill Tim. Jamming his truck into park, he gripped the steering wheel until it creaked, heaving out a deep breath. Ford didn’t need to get involved. He knew that. He understood that Penni was strong and independent and that she’d never ask for help, because she just didn’t need it.

Still, there was no way Ford could sleep next to her knowing there was a potential threat to what he was claiming as his own. Perhaps it was his own ego or natural pack instincts. But no one was going to hurt her, not when he could help.

Ford slammed the truck door and saw a shadow move inside the house toward the front door. Stomping up the white steps that needed touch-up paint, he raised his fist to knock, only to have the door open a crack.

“Hello, Ford?” Penni’s mom asked hesitantly. Ford saw instantly where Penni got her curvy figure and hazel eyes, but where Penni’s hair was a honey blond, her mother’s had hints of red.

“Yes, ma’am. I am very sorry to disturb you, but I’ll be needing to speak with Tim.” Alright, not the approach he had planned on.

Penni’s mom was not an unintelligent woman. She cast a look behind her before slipping out the door and closing it.

“I don’t think now is the best time,” she counseled.

“I realize that, but I like your daughter and I dislike someone making her feel uncomfortable in her own home,” Ford clipped out.

“Penni can take care of herself,” her mother snapped right back.

“She shouldn’t have to.” Ford fought the urge to step forward and intimidate her.

“Are you questioning how I’ve raised my daughter?” She pulled herself up to her full height, which was still shorter than his.

“No, I’m questioning why you allow anyone to torment your daughter,” Ford rumbled.

Dammit. He had not come here to fight with Penni’s mom.

“It’s far past time you leave,” her mom said, moving to the door.

“Ma’am, I’m sorry I’ve offended you—”

“But not sorry for what you said.”

Ford blew out a breath. “No. Look, I’d like to get an overnight bag for Penni. I didn’t come here to fight with you.”

Her mom went to say something, but changed her mind.

After a pause, she surprised Ford with, “You know what? Come on in.” She turned on her heel, leaving the door to bang against the hallway wall as Ford followed her in cautiously. He looked over the floral wallpaper and the antique hallway table, moving into the living room. As she passed the foot of the stairs, Penni’s mom nodded toward the upstairs and said, “Her room is on the end.”

With that, she walked away. Ford watched her click her nude-toned heels into the kitchen. She disappeared and an exterior door opened and slammed.

Turning his attention back to the pale blue carpeting, Ford heard another heartbeat. With a carnal smile, he bounded up the stairs. He paused outside the door where Tim was playing video games. No, he had come to get Penni a bag. Turning his glance down the hallway, he moved silently into her room.

He took it in for a moment. The high school banners still plastered on the walls, posters of some boy band or another, stuffed animals sitting in a striped chair. He smiled, seeing Penni in everything there. Opening

her closet, he grabbed the bag she had brought over to his house previously, stocking it with a few different outfits, including one skin-tight dress he was hoping he could talk her into. Then out of.

He went back to the room where Tim was. A slow, wolfish smile formed on his lips as he pounded on the door.

“What the fuck, Amber?” Tim ripped open the door, his eyes widening. Ford scanned him quickly, finding no threat in him.

“I’m not Amber.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Tim demanded, puffing out his chest and ripping off his headset.

“I’m Ford,” he smiled. “You’ve been messing with the wrong girl.”

“You can have the old, cranky bitch,” he announced. What the fuck was wrong with Amber, Ford wondered, keeping this waste of air around?

“No, Penni. She’s mine.” Internally, Ford paused. When had he claimed Penni? Shit. Had his wolf claimed her and he hadn’t seen it?

“Bro, I can’t help she wants what I got.” Tim held his hands away from his lacking physique.

Ford chuckled darkly. Clearing the distance between them, he slammed Tim against the wall, letting his eyes change and his fangs descend. “She’s mine! Touch her again, and I’ll skin you ... aliive.” He drew out the last word, scenting Tim’s fear. Then he turned, closed the door, and picked up the overnight bag.

...

Becca and I were on our third pint of chocolate cookie dough with added caramel from Bubba’s when the doorbell rang. Sprawled out on her indigo couch and offering running commentary as we binge-watched The Bachelor, we looked at each other with a silent question.

She rolled over to check her phone. “It’s not mine.”

“Ford doesn’t know where you live,” I reminded her.

We stood up together, creeping around the peach wall to peek out the side window. Our postures relaxed when we spied Randy and Ford together. Ford was holding onto my overnight bag. Had I forgotten it at his place?

“Are they fighting?” Becca whispered, turning to look at me.

I shifted to watch, seeing subtle cues of lip twitching giving away their irritation. “Silently?” I asked with a laugh.

“Should we let them in?” Becca whispered.

I shrugged, “Ford has my bag.”

“Oh, hot damn,” Becca said, striding towards the door and ripping it open.

“Did you give Tim holy hell?” she asked Ford.

I came up behind her, waiting for his answer as he met my gaze. “I did,” he said.

I smiled. “How did you know?” I asked. He shrugged. While I wasn’t one for others to fight my battles, it was sweet for Ford to get my bag.

“Lionel said you seemed off at the game, and I put two and two together.”

“Did you help him?” Becca asked Randy.

Randy scoffed, drawing his brow down disbelievingly. “No, I certainly did not.”

“Come on in, Ford. See ya later, Randy,” Becca said, closing the door.

Ford and I exchanged shocked looks as he moved past Becca the Guard.

“Becca, come on!” Randy yelled as the door closed in his face.

“Let’s go. Just because you are here bearing gifts doesn’t mean our custard bender is over.” Becca shoved us towards the couches.

I laughed, taking Ford’s hand. “Thanks for getting me my stuff.”

He nodded. “Tim won’t be an issue again, but I don’t think your mother is a fan of me.” I squeezed his hand. “Also, Lionel said he’s available Friday for dinner.”

“Well hot damn, I’m coming too!” Becca said, hitting play on the TV.

...

Ford went home late that night after a soul-searing kiss on Becca’s porch, complete with the porch light blinking on and off, courtesy of a laughing Becca.

“Let’s go,” I said, shoving her up the stairs.

“So what’s the deal with Randy?” I asked as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

She shrugged. “He’s been bossy, which is usually fine since I’m laid back. But he keeps pushing on issues I’m not budging on. So I thought tonight would be a great ‘fuck you’ to his ways.”

I laughed, “I’m sure he will be groveling at your feet tomorrow.”

“If he’s not, then he’s not the one. As much as I like him, I clung to him in the insanity of Dad getting moved from the nursing home to hospice and back again.” She sighed, parting ways with me at the guest room door. “I’m not going to stress over it. Whatever will be, will be.”

Chapter 6

Becca, I assumed, was cooking breakfast when I dragged my ass downstairs.

“That’s a beautiful smell,” I said, losing my smile in a hurry as I rounded the corner to find Randy. “Ugh, hey,” I offered lamely.

“Hi,” he said. I snagged a breakfast sausage from the paper towel-lined plate before looking for Becca. Not finding her, I narrowed my gaze.

“Does Becca know you are here?”

He huffed, “Yeah.”

“Well, your social skills are impressive. You should drink more, makes you more approachable,” I informed him, getting a cup of coffee.

He “hrumphed” a response. Whatever, dude. Whatever.

Becca stomped in. “Morning,” she grunted. Girl had me dead to rights as the crankier one in the morning.

“Hey, beautiful,” I teased.

She glowered at me until I passed over my freshly poured cup of coffee.

“Damn your skills of persuasion,” I hissed.

She huffed a laugh.

“Have you heard from your mom at all?” Becca asked.

“No.” My answer stung me deeper than I’d expected.

“What’s with this guy? She’s never held onto one for so long after they’d gone bad,” Becca questioned.

I heaved a sigh, looking over at Randy, who was carefully flipping pancakes. “I don’t know, honestly. Midlife crisis? The guy is a piece of work.”

“You’re welcome to stay here as long as needed,” Becca said over the rim of her coffee cup, casting a challenging glance at Randy.

“Thanks, I may have to take you up on that.” I didn’t try to hide my smile from Randy.

We parted after breakfast, Becca going to see her dad before heading in to work while I was on a mission to take her files digital. That meant a lot of scanning. Terrible, terrible idea on my part.

...

Entering the garage, I called hello to Ford, who was under a truck with an intense look of concentration. I only got a grunt as acknowledgement. I was chalking that up to the vehicle and not our relationship. Unlocking the office door, I stopped dead at the sight of a dozen long-stemmed red roses in a square, etched glass vase.

“What?” I breathed, stepping forward and inhaling deeply. Plucking the thick card from the center, I read with quickened breaths. But I was totally, definitely not crying at the card.

Stay the summer with me.

Damn charming man, finding a way into my ice princess heart.

Turning, I took a shaky breath, finding his powerful form filling the doorway, watching me closely.

My smile was all gratitude before I flung myself at him, errant tears streaking down my face.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He inhaled deeply into my neck before placing a kiss against my cheek, his hands kneading the muscles of my lower back.

“It’s only so we can have more sex,” he teased.

I laughed, pinching his arm.

“Ouch,” he complained.

“Don’t you dare ruin this sweet moment!” I chided him.

He relented, pulling me close again for a soft kiss.

“We’ll go after work to get your stuff,” he murmured.

“Okay,” I whispered, giving serious thought to breaking Becca’s rule. He groaned, going in for a second kiss.

“Oh, hell naw!” Becca yelled, jerking us from our positions. “Y’all are not having sex in my office!”

I laughed and Ford groaned. “Ten minutes, Becca!” he attempted, fingers dragging against my hips as he stepped back.

“Boy, there is a truck down there wasting away and not making me money!” she hollered back.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I watched him go, all gooey inside.

“And what were you thinking?” Becca demanded.

“He asked me to move in with him for the summer,” I dreamily replied, handing her the card.

“And you are okay with this? This seems like an actual relationship,” she questioned.

I shrugged. “It’s just for the summer, Becca. I still have another semester of school and a job nine hours away lined up after that.” Dang her for dragging me back to reality.

Becca shrugged. “Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. I’ve never seen you so smitten with a man.” She tossed the card back at me.

“Ehh, the porn star lasted a bit,” I told her, sitting back at her computer, still staring at the card as she rummaged through files.

“Lord, I didn’t hear that.” She slammed the drawer. “I’ll be in the bays working if you need anything.”

The rest of the day passed easily and Randy even showed up with lunch for everyone. All in all, I was feeling mighty fine about how the rest of the summer was going to play out.

...

Back at my house, we loaded Ford's truck down with my clothing and I was beyond thankful no one was there. It made the whole process far more bearable than having to confront my mother about her lapse in judgment.

But as Ford was tying down the last suitcase, my mom's car pulled up with Tim riding shotgun.

The red car hardly had time to stop moving before my mom slammed the rusted door open.

"What ... is ... this?" she demanded.

I shrugged. "I'm staying at Ford's for the rest of the summer," I told her, good mood gone as I forced myself to meet her pissed-off stare.

"Why the hell is that?" she asked, raising her voice.

"Because I'm tired of having to be on guard in my own damn house and I'm tired of you picking that bag of dicks over ME!" I yelled back, pointing at Tim.

"It's him, he's poisoning you against me!" she hissed, narrowing her gaze at Ford while pointing one manicured finger at him.

"He's done no such thing. You did this all on your damn own, take responsibility!"

I forced out a breath, trying to calm the anger that was taking me by surprise. "Mom, I'm sorry, but for now, this is just better." I willed my jaw to unclench. I shouldn't have been the one apologizing.

She nodded and I pretended not to see the tears in her eyes. "Fine. You still coming Friday for dinner?" She pulled her purse from the car, holding her head high as she passed me.

"Yes, Momma," I answered softly, the dagger of her choosing Tim over me slowly slicing through my heart.

With that, they walked into the house. I only caught a glance at Tim, who was casting terrified peeks at Ford. That brought a beautiful smile to my face.

...

Penni had just been through a lot. Holding her hand while they drove back to his place, Ford caught her wiping an errant tear away and he was at a loss for words. What was he supposed to say? Sorry your mom is a bitch?

That was a terrible idea.

"So, you really did a number on Tim," she commented, sniffing. "Do you think he told my mom?"

Ford huffed a response, "I made him piss himself. He's not telling anyone about that."

She exhaled a shaky laugh. "Thank you."

Ford squeezed her hand. "I can honestly say it was my pleasure."

His phone belted notes of AC/DC's "Thunderstruck." Seeing Lionel's name appear, he gave her an apologetic glance before releasing her hand and answering.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"I picked up the new and improved cameras. When can you install them?" Lionel asked, an edge of exhaustion coloring his voice. That sent red flags up for Ford.

“Tonight, just give me a few hours,” Ford assured him. The line went dead.

“Everything okay?” Penni hedged.

Ford sighed. “Yeah. I have to go over to Lionel’s for a bit. Will you be okay at my place?”

“You have food, TV and booze. I’ll be fine,” she reassured him with a small smile.

He debated asking Lionel if she could come along, but considering the emotional roller coaster she had just ridden with her mom, having her catch him or a longtime family friend shifting into a wolf wasn’t in anyone’s interest.

...

Ford had left Penni in bed. After showering and eating, she had just wanted to decompress, and the only thing he wanted was to stay with her. As he backed out of the driveway, seeing the soft lamp on in his bedroom was testing his self-control.

The drive barely registered in his mind. He blew out a tortured breath before putting his truck into park in front of the massive home nestled into the woods. Lionel had acreage to rival the forest preserve that Ford’s own land jutted into.

Ford found the shifter in question sitting on the steps of the back porch, boxes piled up next to him. Taking his cue, Ford sat down.

“Did you talk to Penni?” Lionel asked.

“I did, she’s going to be staying with me for right now.”

Lionel heaved a long sigh. “I never thought I’d be happy to hear that.”

Ford shrugged, shooting him a side glance, not sure if he should take issue with the possible slight.

“How did, Amber—her mom—take it?” Lionel asked.

“Not well,” Ford admitted. “I don’t understand her obsession with that kid.”

Lionel grunted, “That makes two of us.” He stood up, picking up boxes. “Let’s get to work.”

...

Ford made it back to Penni and his bed before the sun came up, but not by much. He took a moment to admire her strewn blond locks and easy breathing before slipping under the navy comforter with her. She rolled toward him, her hands seeking his as she rested her head against his shoulder.

Ford let out a contented sigh, sleep quickly claiming him.

...

They were going to be late. Ford was wishing for a few more hours nestled next to Penni, but she had insisted they needed to get in to the shop. Why? Because he had a job to do.

“Remind me why I can’t quit again?” he grumbled, turning right onto Main Street.

Penni laughed, shoving at him. “Seriously, quit being cranky.”

“If that’s what you want, you should get me coffee,” he grumbled, turning left onto Park Street.

Penni laughed again before the sound died in her throat.

“Oh my god,” she whispered.

Ford followed her gaze to Becca’s shop, anger flaring through his veins.

...

Spray painted across the shop’s front, angry red letters announced, “Shifter fuckers will die!”

It was repeated over and over again, with a few “whores” thrown in for good measure, along with everyone’s favorite c-word. Every single surface reachable without a ladder had some insult marring it.

We slipped out of the truck, meeting in the front, our eyes still in a state of disbelief.

“What does that even mean?” I grumbled, annoyed. Insults were far more enjoyable when I understood them.

Ford turned to me. “This is terrible timing,” he said, shoving a hand through his hair before exhaling a breath and meeting my gaze, “but I’m a shifter.”

I blinked at him dumbly. “What. The. Fuck.” It wasn’t a question. My mind was an avalanche, though I guess the revelation did explain his fantastic stamina.

He shifted his stance, dark eyes searching my own.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I demanded.

He huffed, pointing without looking at the spray paint on the metal building. “Because people hate me for what I am. I’ve learned to be cautious.”

“I’m not like that!” I yelled, blinking back tears. Shit. I was *not* crying. “You’ve seen my entire life, the good, bad and ugly, and you didn’t think you should tell me?”

“I know—I wanted to—I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” he offered, the remorse plain in his gaze.

Shaking my head, unable to close my mouth for the overwhelming shock, I closed my eyes for a moment and blew out a breath. “So that’s there for me?” I realized. Bullies didn’t scare me. Especially ones that tucked and ran.

Ford scuffed the ground. “I let some of my powers slip when I threatened Tim.”

I nodded, feeling the heat of a tear slip down. “Tim?” I ground out. That motherfucker should be castrated.

“I can smell him here,” Ford offered, matching my quiet tone.

I nodded, flexing my hands, forcing my eyes open. “We need to report this, in case anything else is damaged and Becca has to file an insurance claim.”

“Penni,” Ford whispered, reaching up to cup my cheek, his unspoken question of “where does this leave things?” obvious.

“I need to deal with this first,” I rasped out.

Ford nodded, taking a step back, his hurt plain and me hating myself for causing it.

I blew out a breath, pulling out my phone and dialing the police.

After filing the report, I debated my next call. Becca would lose her mind and with everything else happening, I didn’t want to add more to her plate. But I didn’t see how I had much of an option.

I dialed her number, she didn't answer. "Hey it's me, I need you to call me back ASAP and stay with Randy or a gun, love ya."

I hung up. For sure my worst message ever, and I have left some doozies.

...

Several tedious minutes later, a squad car arrived. I had a lot to discuss with Ford, but now was not the time or place. The few cars passing by were slowing down to a crawl, passengers and drivers looking and pointing at the threats painted in fire engine red.

Walking around Ford's truck, I waved to the sheriff, Sam.

"Well, Penelope, I didn't know you were back," she greeted me, not with a smile.

"Hey, Sam. I've only been back a few weeks," I told her. She had cut her hair off again and it was cute on her, highlighting her strong cheekbones and piercing gaze, which landed on me after reading the slurs on the shop face.

"Becca here?" she asked, the little good humor drained from her face.

I shook my head. "I left her a message."

She nodded, reaching for her phone. "I need a patrol to go by and check on Becca Woodson ... Yes ... That'll be fine ... report back and have her come to her shop immediately."

Pulling a pair of gloves from her back pocket, she went to work inspecting the scrawl.

"Y'all have any idea who might do this?" Sam asked us.

I shook my head and Ford came to stand with me, done examining the artwork for himself.

"Any chance Becca has cameras?" Sam asked me.

"I don't think so," I answered.

"Was this meant for her?" Sam asked, turning her full attention on me.

"Possibly." I shook my head. "I'd guess the 'whore' is for me." I met her gaze steadily. I might have been unnerved, but I wasn't ashamed of who I was.

Sam nodded slowly, looking back at the scrawl, about to ask another question when her phone rang, followed by mine.

Seeing Becca's name, I quickly picked up. "Hey, you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine, what's going on? I just had an officer wake me up and tell me to get to work," Becca said, annoyed. "And your message is some cryptic and creepy shit."

"Someone spray painted the front of the shop." I paused.

"WHAT? How? WHO? Oh my god, how bad is it?" She groaned.

"It's fixable. Sheriff Sam is here now taking pictures. Once she leaves, Ford and I will get supplies to take care of it."

Becca groaned and I could hear the tears in her voice. "I'm on my way."

Sam turned to me. "Are you dating a shifter?" she asked point blank.

I didn't look at Ford, but I felt the intensity of his gaze. I wasn't sure we were dating, honestly, although technically we were living together. I certainly didn't want to have that conversation in front of an audience.

"I might have, at some point. I've slept around a lot," I told her.

Sam huffed, a small smile on her lips. "If you could narrow it down, who you've slept with recently, that would help."

"Me," Ford said, coming to wrap an arm around my waist. "She's been sleeping with me."

I nodded. "A lot, like bunnies. Exclusive bunnies," I added. Well, it was exclusive for me, and based on the tightening of Ford's hold, I felt confident in saying the same for him.

Sam laughed. "I don't need the details. You're fairly new here?" she questioned Ford. In a town that didn't gain or lose many faces, one had to be a resident a while before not being "new."

"I am," he agreed.

"Any ideas on who did this?" Sam asked with that damn intense gaze of hers.

"No, none. There haven't been any upset customers, nor any threats. This is a shock to all of us," Ford answered smoothly. Damn, he was a good liar. Hell, I believed him. But was omission lying? It was to me, and I was fairly confident Sam would feel the same.

Sam nodded, and we all turned to see Randy pulling up in his truck. He got out with a snarl and a curse. Becca got out on wobbly feet and I went to her, letting her hold onto me as we surveyed the damage.

"Who would do this?" she whispered.

"Becca, are you dating a shifter?" Sam asked.

Becca didn't hear, tears falling as she struggled not to hyperventilate.

"She's dating me," Randy answered quietly.

"Only you?" Sam replied levelly.

"Only me," growled Randy.

I blew out a breath. This was getting us nowhere fast.

Sam nodded, turning to Becca. "What about customers? Has anyone been irritated with you?"

Becca shook her head, pulling herself up. "No, Penni has been watching the office for me while I've been out taking care of my dad."

Sam nodded sympathetically before turning on me. "Penelope, same question."

I groaned, I didn't like when people called me that. "Nope," I clipped out. "No one I've talked to has been anything but pleasant."

Sam nodded, looking back over the damage. "I'll finish taking pictures and you can do what you need to do."

We all nodded, drifting away from her. "Who would do this?" Becca whispered.

"Tim," both Randy and Ford answered, their eyes glowering with flecks of gold swarming there.

"What? How can you know that? You should tell the sheriff," Becca said, looking back to Sam.

Ford sighed, looking at Randy without changing his expression. Randy shook his head slightly.

I narrowed my eyes. Could shifters communicate silently?

Becca's gaze swung back to the defaced building behind us, shoulders sagging, chin trembling.

"Why?" she whispered. Tears trickling down her cheeks, she took a choppy breath.

My gaze shot to Ford, but his secrets weren't mine to tell.

I drew a breath. "Things got heated with my mom when I picked up my stuff, Tim was there. It's probably his way of lashing out at me."

"But why 'shifter fucker?'" Becca questioned.

Yeah, that was a good question.

"We went to Howler. Tim might have heard that from Amber," Ford pointed out.

Becca nodded, holding my gaze. Omitting the truth didn't feel good at all. Especially from my best friend, practically sister. Ford and I were going to have to figure this business out quickly, or I was going to spill his beans.

"Why don't you two go home and rest?" I suggested softly. "We'll take care of the shop."

Becca looked numb, eyes bloodshot and nose red.

"It's okay, sweetie," I repeated. "Go home and have wild monkey sex, then get drunk and do it again. We will handle everything."

"How are you so calm about—" she waved her hand at the shop. "Some psycho destroyed the shop and threatened to kill one of us ... both of us?" she ended on a whisper.

I shrugged, not too certain why myself. "It's just garbage from a lowlife piece of shit." Tim wouldn't actually hurt me, I'd snap that little twig. Was it wrong that I actually wanted him to try something so I could justify taking a frying pan to his head?

She didn't look away from the carnage, but she did let Randy lead her away. I blew out a breath, watching Sam wave before she also turned and left.

"So, which one of us is googling how to remove spray paint?" I asked Ford on an annoyed sigh. It was going to be a long day, and I wasn't looking forward to sweating if it didn't end in a climax or a breath-taking view, but mainly a climax.

...

I was sore, my hands crippled, by the time we finished.

We hadn't talked much; it felt like we were being watched. Whether that was from paranoia or actual instinct, I wasn't sure.

We had grabbed dinner out and I was headed to bed after a hot shower, a chaste hot shower. Fucking Tim, messing with my mojo.

Climbing into bed, I snuggled against Ford. "How many shifters are here?"

He chuckled, looking down at me. "A few. This is a remote town with massive wild areas."

"Is Randy a shifter?" I asked around a yawn.

“What makes you think that?” he asked, not answering my question.

“The little head nod you two were doing, it made me think he knew something.”

“I suppose it’s really his place to tell you, but yes, he is.”

“Is the Sheriff, Sam?” I questioned, letting sleep tug my eyes closed.

“No, that would have saved time and awkward questions.”

I muttered an answer, too far gone in sleep to form actual words.

Chapter 7

I jerked awake, sitting up and looking around, getting my bearings. My phone was vibrating and had fallen off the nightstand. Lying back and rolling to my stomach, I stretched out a hand, my fingers just brushing the pink case before latching on and pulling it closer.

I squinted at the overly bright display, seeing a text from my mother. *Tim is gone. Come home please.*

I groaned, opening the message and staring at the gray keyboard in front of me. My home felt violated, and my mom had taken so long to get rid of this one. I didn't want to go back and have it all happen again.

Shifter or no, I was safe with Ford. Chewing my bottom lip, I gave that thought room to be analyzed. Ford was a shifter. He could turn furry, had a pack, possibly ran under the full moon, and had some primal instincts under his skin.

Did that bother me?

While I wanted to ask him more questions tomorrow, my gut said no. Ford had always been gentle with me, unless I wanted it rough, never harmed me, and went to bat against Tim. He was one of the good guys.

We can talk tomorrow. Becca's shop was vandalized and I spent all day cleaning graffiti. I'm not going anywhere tonight.

Granted, dropping Becca's problems was a cop out. But I didn't care. I needed the time to think.

Okay, love you.

I didn't respond, opting instead to snuggle next to Ford, waiting for exhaustion to claim me. But it wasn't coming. Instead, a slow burn of anger replaced what should have been peaceful slumber. Why had she kept that dipshit around so damn long? Even after his multiple transgressions? I sighed, rubbing my eyes while a painful truth took root in my brain.

I felt safe here with Ford, and I no longer did with my mother. She always had picked me first, always. Tim should have been out on his ass at the first hint of my complaint. But he wasn't, he was allowed to torment me and part of that was my mother's fault. She was supposed to protect me, but she didn't. Who even knew if the breakup was her idea or his?

I groaned, grinding the heels of my hands into my gritty eyes. This was not how I planned to spend my summer, with unwanted introspection.

I woke Ford up instead, slipping a hand into his boxers. He muttered behind closed lids, turning toward me. Smiling, I went to my knees, slipping his boxers down before abandoning my own minimal sleepwear.

Straddling him, I applied pressure against his velvet skin with my palms, earning a hiss as his eyes fluttered open.

"Penni?" he whispered, leaning up through squinted eyes.

I kissed him, leaning my hands on either side of his head, my tongue sweeping before retreating as I nibbled on his lip.

“Hell, woman,” he whispered, running a hand down my stomach, searching for the heat between my legs.

I denied him, instead sliding back, stroking his engorged cock against my sensitive flesh, already dripping with need. I didn’t tease him long before aligning our bodies and sitting down with a contented groan.

Ford reached up to drag me down for a kiss. I moved against him, stalling his ability to move his lips while I moved him inside of me.

“Lords, what has gotten into you?” he questioned on a groan, releasing me to sit back up.

I moved until he was hitting all the good spots. With a hiss of pleasure, I increased my pace, our panting the only sound as our eyes locked. I groaned, tossing my head back as I created my climax quickly, my fingers flexing into his chest.

My body quaked in pleasure before I looked down with hooded eyes at Ford and began moving again, my intent now focused on him. I curved my hips, noting how his eyes rolled back in his head as I continued the movement.

“Fuck,” he hissed, fingers digging into my hips. I increased my tempo, lowering my head to drop kisses against his chest and neck. With shuttering breaths and arms wrapped tightly around me, he poured his release into me.

Rolling me onto my back, he looked down lazily at me. “You can wake me like that anytime,” he teased, kissing me slowly and sweetly.

Chapter 8

Ford returned the favor of that midnight booty session by biting the delicate flesh of my neck. I sucked a breath in, my body automatically arching against him. “Good morning,” he rumbled, gloriously naked.

I saved my words, turning to kiss him instead.

...

Becca texted sometime during our morning humping session to give us the day off, since we had busted ass cleaning up the shop.

Rolling to my side in the bed, I looked up at Ford getting ready for the shower. “What are we going to do today?” I asked.

The look he shot over his well-sculpted ass spoke volumes. I laughed, rolling to my back in bed. “Not ALL day,” I corrected him.

Dragging myself back to reality, I let out a long sigh. “I need to go see my mom. She texted me that her and Tim broke up.”

Ford stuck his head out of the shower to yell, “Come in here and talk.”

I huffed, knowing his sneaky ways and loving them. Opening the shower door, I slipped into his waiting arms.

“Do I need to repeat myself?” I asked softly, smiling up at his dark, wet locks.

“No, I heard you perfectly. Shifter hearing,” he said through a wicked grin.

I gave him a shove and he didn’t move an inch. Turning me under the water, he pushed back my hair to massage my scalp before releasing me to lather those large and deft hands in my shampoo.

“Are you moving back in with her?” he asked softly. My eyes closed, I was at a disadvantage, unable to read his expression.

“No ... I mean, unless you want me to leave,” I answered. Running the soap out of my hair, I looked up at him with my heart in my eyes. “I’ve never felt so safe as I do with you. It may just break me leaving when the summer is over.”

Holy motherfucker, that was a confession I did not expect to leave my lips. Fear crept into me, stealing the warmth from my body as I waited, hardly breathing, for his response.

He smiled, that easy, charming, dimpled smile. “Aww baby, sure you don’t want to reconsider spending the day in bed?”

I kissed him, tempted.

...

In the end, I pulled up alone to Mom’s house, a cold resolve hardened in my stomach. She opened the door before I had even stepped out.

“Oh, Penni,” she whispered, holding back tears, running over to me.

I held her for a moment, a rush of emotions I wasn't expecting bombarding me. While I loved her, a weariness had settled into my bones.

I held on for another breath before releasing her to touch up her perfectly applied mascara and eyeliner. She read my silence, knowing I wasn't falling back into old patterns. Straightening up from the touchup, she turned. "Let's go inside."

I followed her up the worn white stairs with tulips blooming on each side and through the front door, closing it softly behind me. Her heels clicked into the kitchen, where she wrung her hands before leaning against the yellow tile counter, crossing her arms over her chest.

"By your lack of bags, I assume you are staying with Ford?" she asked, a cold edge to her voice.

I leaned against the island, facing her. "Yeah," I said cautiously.

She nodded, quietly.

I searched for the right words to say. "I wish you had gotten rid of him sooner."

She huffed, "He wasn't that bad."

"He was," I countered. "He made me feel unsafe. You promised that wouldn't happen again."

"Penelope, you are an adult now, not a child. I am allowed to have a life."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You brought a perv into our home, and I don't get to have a say in that?" I asked her, dumbfounded.

"It's only your house for a few more months. Then you're off again!" she yelled, throwing up her arms, frustrated.

"You said you were happy for me landing a job already!" I yelled at her.

"I am! But where do you think that leaves me?" she yelled back.

"HERE!" I screamed.

"ALONE!" she yelled, tears threatening to fall in earnest.

"Alone?" I repeated, confused. "You have your friends here, a life here, why would you say alone?"

"You're leaving to start this amazing life without me," she forced out, her chest heaving, "and I just thought—I thought maybe it was time for me to look at settlin' down. I don't want to be alone. I don't want to be a constant burden to you."

"Oh, Momma," I said, moving to embrace her.

"I'm sorry about Tim, sweetie. I never should have let things go on as long as I did," she finally confessed.

I held her, already having forgiven her and glad to mend our relationship.

...

Back at Lionel's, Ford's phone chimed and he read the message with a groan. *Done at Mom's, it's all good. Want lunch?*

“What?” Lionel asked as they reviewed footage from the prior night, making sure nothing supernatural showed before emailing the video to the police. The victim had been a hiker whose fiancé reported her as missing.

“Penni,” Ford said, looking hopefully at Lionel. “She’s asking if I want lunch.”

Lionel grunted, “Tell her to get me something too and come over.”

Ford drew down his brows for a moment, surprised by Lionel’s easy acceptance of Penni coming over. “How did you know I told her?” he asked.

Lionel smiled, all canines. “I have my ways.”

Ford texted back and she replied with a kissy face that had his own mouth turning up at the thought of kissing her.

“Back to work here. They’ve requested twenty-four hours of footage, and we can’t go explaining why there are giant wolves running around,” Lionel growled.

Ford sighed. It seemed unfair to him to pull this gig. Wasn’t there a potential witch that needed killing?

...

I pulled up in front of Lionel’s massive man cave of a home. Natural wood accents had been recently refinished and it looked like the porch had been redone. I cocked my head to the side; was he a shifter, too? I had thought when Ford said he was over here working that he meant on Lionel’s new truck, but there it sat, undisturbed in the gravel driveway.

Hefting my plastic bags of mouth-watering food, I ambled up the grassy path overlaid with round pavers. I had just about reached the steps to the porch when the door burst open, shocking me to stillness. Lionel and Ford bounded out, sniffing the air.

I stayed still, having little experience as to what the fuck was going on.

Ford growled, turning his molten gaze towards me. “Don’t. Fuckin’. Touch. Her,” he growled.

My hands sweating on the plastic bags, shoulders tight, I turned my head to follow Ford’s gaze. Behind me, and I mean directly behind me, was a man. I only saw his black jacket buttoned over his lean frame before my gaze traveled upwards to pale skin, a smile that revealed fangs, and ambered eyes. My perusal stopped there and I tried to take a step forward toward safety, but his hand circled around the back of my neck, stopping me. Air remained trapped in my lungs as I looked up at him.

“She is a beauty, isn’t she?” He took a long inhale near my throat before laughing darkly. “I see you have branded her.”

Ford growled and I could feel his fury and frustration.

“Be at ease, beast, I have come to speak to Lionel, not to turn your pretty pet into my own,” the man taunted, running a finger down my cheek. He turned my gaze around to Lionel and Ford, pushing me forward as he approached them, his hand still around the back of my neck, my breath exiting me in a whoosh. His touch was ice and my heartbeat thudded in my ears, blocking out all rational thought.

We stopped a few feet from the porch, where Lionel kept a hand on Ford as I kept a death grip on my to-go bags. I met Ford’s dark, tortured gaze. Helplessness washed over me, then regret and pure violence. I forced a breath to my starved lungs. I wasn’t a victim, never had been. I wasn’t going to become one now.

"I'm okay, Ford," I said, steeling my gaze to his own. Rational thought flooded back as my heart steadied its rhythm. Ford turned his attention to the problem, who still had his hand on me.

"What do you want?" Lionel growled.

The creeper sighed. "Where to begin ... it is such a story of poor choices and poorer options."

Lionel's growl deepened.

"Yes, yes," Cold Hands continued, "eloquent speech is wasted on the ill-mannered dogs. I've come to strike a deal that, I think, will benefit all parties."

"Killing you?" growled Ford, Lionel's arm shooting out to keep him in place.

"Why, yes, I delivered myself into your unwashed hands in order to have myself killed, such a brilliant idea. Why didn't I think of that?" His voice was light and carefree behind me.

"Get. To. It." Lionel hissed.

"Oh bloody hell, I want you to kill the damn witches who have me under thrall. I don't have long before they know I'm gone," he ended with an annoyed sigh.

"Why would you want that?" Lionel questioned. Ford's nostrils flared with his breathing.

"Because I have not survived a century, and gotten myself out from underneath a lunatic Master Vampire, just to be put under an enchantment by piss-poor witches playing with wolves." He was losing his cool and his icy fingers closed on my neck. "You kill the witches and I go free."

"Did you kill the hiker?" Ford demanded.

What the fuck was going on?

The creeper leaned heavily against me, growling low. "Make them understand that I am compelled, and the witches are calling me. I am—" He hissed, I think in pain, "I am bound."

With that, he released me, tearing away in a blur with Lionel hot after him. I just stood there, panting, while Ford held me to his chest, rubbing circles on my back.

"Did Lionel just turn into a wolf?" I high-pitched whispered.

Ford's exhale ruffled the hair at my nape before he pulled back to look at me. "Yeah, yeah he did."

I groaned. "Can we back up to the part where you tell me what the fuck is going on?"

...

We were inside, my food untouched, although Lionel and Ford had eaten heartily. Apparently, being an empty pit was a shifter thing.

I was pacing.

"So you, Lionel, are the alpha of the pack, and have been dealing with problems, including a dead hiker, victim of what you believe to be witches and possibly a rogue pack. That," I said, pointing to the front door, "vampire is being compelled by them and took me hostage so you would listen."

Lionel nodded and I looked to Ford, who had started in on my food. "Yeah," he said around a mouthful of orange chicken.

"What is a Master Vampire?" I asked, rubbing my temples.

Ford looked to Lionel, who filled me in. “A Master Vampire runs an entire household of vampires. They range in size, based on a master’s ability to control his or her house. Vampires are notorious for double crossing and trickery, so it takes an exceptionally powerful one to hold together larger houses.”

“Once a Master Vampire is killed, the vampires become houseless. Houseless vampires are the lowest of the low in their world. Without a leader, they are easy prey for anything—other vampires, humans, witches—and there’s nothing to stop it.”

“Why don’t they just join another House or elect someone the new leader?” I asked.

Lionel sighed. “Unlike shifter alphas, the head of a vampire House has total and complete control over everyone in it. If he or she says jump, the House asks how high. It’s an easy way to become corrupted, and most Houses are. It’s not surprising that most vampires, once freed, want to stay that way.”

I nodded, processing the information.

“The police saw our camera system and are requesting the video from 24 hours before we found the girl, but all it shows is giant wolves running around since the witches short circuited our system before dropping the hiker,” Ford added. “It may have been the damn vampire who actually did the drop. Did you see how fucking fast he moved?”

I hadn’t, but the fact that Lionel couldn’t catch him spoke volumes.

I shook my head. “Is the sheriff the only one who isn’t a shifter in this damn town?”

“There’s you,” Lionel helpfully pointed out.

I ran a hand over my face. “Okay, what can I help with here? Is there like a website I can research for how a witch binds a vampire?”

“He may be lying,” Lionel pointed out.

“Why come here then?” I asked, plopping down on the indigo couch facing them.

“To point us down a different direction, distract us while they continue to do whatever it is they are doing,” Ford said with a shrug.

Lionel leaned back, staring up at the exposed beam ceiling. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to do additional research. We are stuck here editing this tape.”

Ford groaned, “I don’t even know where to start for websites on witches and vampires.”

I shrugged, “I’ve got time.”

...

I rubbed my bloodshot and gritty eyes. When I’d said I had time, I thought maybe a few hours, not until the moon hung high overhead and my eyes burned from staring at the screen for so long. At least Larry, Lionel’s witch contact, had pointed me down the correct rabbit hole.

I printed out another piece of paper, prowling out of Lionel’s office with my stack in hand.

Pushing open the wooden door, I rounded into the security office.

“Where’s Lionel?” I asked, sitting down wearily next to Ford in the plush office chair.

“Alpha shit, someone always needs something,” he grunted.

I didn’t know what to say to that. “I think I have something.”

Ford turned to me, rubbing his own eyes. “Do tell.” He stretched, gloriously muscled arms flexing above his head.

I sighed, “It doesn’t make any sense, well in hindsight I suppose it does.” I gathered my thoughts. “The vampire may have been telling the truth, since the circle you found and the dead hiker would be enough to complete the...” I fumbled through my stack of papers for the exact name, continuing, “subjection of an undead. Apparently, if he was truthful, that dead hiker’s soul is being used to control him, as in he has to obey orders to the letter of his understanding. But the soul’s power will deteriorate.” I looked at Ford. “So if what he said was true, they’re going to need another victim to keep him compliant.”

Ford brooded, arms crossed firmly across his chest, finally asking, “How fast will they burn through a soul’s power?”

“No idea. A few sources claim it depends how many commands they give him.”

“Do they contain the soul? How do they keep its power?” Ford questioned.

Repeating from memory, I yawned, “An element of power.”

He raised an eyebrow, and I assumed he was looking for elaboration. “Stones, jewelry, glass sculptures, stuff like that. But it has to be kept on the body of the controller for it to actually work.”

Ford’s eyes went unfocused, and I tilted my head before waving my hand at him.

He pulled me into his lap, earning a squeak from me. “Pack can talk internally. I was letting Lionel know.” He groaned and I wrapped my arms around his neck, his warmth and smell instantly relaxing the tightness in my shoulders. “There are too many variables to know where they might strike next.”

“What else can I do?” I asked, grazing my lips against his ear. He growled in response, flipping me to straddle him.

“This seems like a bad idea,” I laughed, looking down at him, stroking the side of his stubbled face.

“The door is closed and I’ll hear if anyone gets close.” He nibbled the soft flesh at the base of my neck. I groaned, my hips rubbing against him without my permission. I wasn’t sold on this idea.

His deft hands slipped against my skin, and yep, all in. I moved with intention, only to be shocked by the door flinging open. Yelping, I tried to pull away from Ford, finding us too entangled for a quick getaway. We ended up in a heap on the floor.

“Get a damn room, you two!” Randy yelled. “This is not some damn brothel, Ford, you should know better.”

I laughed, untangling from the chair and Ford.

“Don’t be jealous. I’m sure Becca’s understanding about your size issues,” Ford taunted.

Ford rolled onto his back, making no attempt to get up, and we dissolved into a fit of laughter.

Randy stormed out, slamming the door. “He really doesn’t like me,” I commented offhandedly.

“Does it bother you?” Ford asked, helping me stand.

“No. But what happened to being able to hear someone coming?”

He pulled me close. “I was distracted,” he shrugged, and I smacked him playfully.

...

With little else to do, Ford and I headed to the police station. I had opted to leave my car at Lionel's, not wanting to drive.

A wicked idea stole over me as I snuck a look at him, his strong profile illuminated by the glowing dash. Biting down on my lip, I slipped next to him.

"Hey Ford, wanna pull over?" I whispered into his ear.

"Penni," he growled, "let me get farther from Lionel's."

I slid back over, pouting. As he looked over at me, wicked idea number two sparked.

Popping the top button of my jeans, I watched his gaze rove over the skin I was exposing as I dragged my zipper down.

"What are you doing?" he hissed.

"Well, since you won't take care of business," I informed him with a shrug, slipping out of my jeans and rubbing myself through my lace panties, "I guess I will."

Ford slammed the truck over to the edge of the narrow road, tossing me against the door.

"Woman, you will be the death of me," he growled, tugging me onto his lap. My hands made quick work of the boundaries holding his velvet steel down.

I groaned, running my palm over the skin there.

I breathed his name before lifting myself up. He tore the lace panties away and I crashed down onto him. My head tipping back gave him perfect access to drop nibbling kisses against my throat. With the sheer stretching of my body, the warmth of him inside of me, the connection was intense. I rocked, coming back down, blinded by the pleasure already vibrating my body.

He let me have another few slow, long strokes before he took control, a growl on his lips my only warning before he held me crushingly close and pounded into my body.

I cried out, his speed and power washing over me in ecstasy and building joy. My thighs clenched around him, warning of my impending climax.

"Come with me baby, please come with me," Ford whispered.

I whimpered, clenching my legs tighter around him. "Ford," I whispered his name brokenly in warning. My body clenched, sending me spiraling, as warmth spread through me and I groaned in contentment, after-shutters vibrating to the depths of my soul.

He nuzzled my neck and we just sat there in perfect contentment.

Slipping off his lap, I groaned as I looked at the mess I was shoving into my jeans. "We have got to be better with condoms."

"Baby, can't we just be done with them?" he huffed out, flexing his legs to allow extra room to zip his own jeans up. "I'll get better at carrying cleanup supplies."

"Ford, what happens when I get pregnant?" I demanded.

"You finish school, we move wherever you want, you work and I'll stay at home with the baby," Ford smiled. "I'd cook and clean, it would be great."

I laughed, "You, domesticated? I doubt it."

He laughed, putting the truck into gear. “Never. I’d still shift into a predator, remember.” He turned toward me, molten gold flashing in his eyes before he pulled off the shoulder.

I huffed. “What would the baby be?” I asked.

“Human. Born shifters from a human are impossible.”

“But there are born shifters?” I asked.

He nodded. “Other Supernaturals can carry our children. They’re a hybrid, with both parents’ supernatural traits.”

“Interesting,” I mused.

It seemed my whole world had been blown apart at the seams, and if I let myself dwell on what having Ford’s children would mean, which I didn’t, my damn heart would go all to hell.

I groaned, “You are marrying me if you knock me up.”

The brilliant smile he sent me was impossible not to smile back at. Reaching over, he intertwined our fingers. Pulling me toward him on the bench seat, he kissed my knuckles. “Just say the word,” he whispered.

I was not analyzing that. I was not wondering if he’d marry me right now after only knowing me for a few weeks. Nope, not happening.

Chapter 9

Becca was in the shop office when we got there in the morning. I took one look at her tear-stained face as she sat dejectedly on the customer couch and shoved Ford toward the bays. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Did you know Randy is a shifter?” she asked, sniffing.

“I did.” She looked up at me, confused and hurt. I sat next to her and took her hands. “I found out the night of the spray paint. I’m sorry I didn’t make sure you knew. It’s been a crazy twenty-four hours, and I do mean crazy.”

“Ford?” she asked. “You know about Ford.”

I nodded. “Found out at the same time. So is Lionel.”

She looked at me in shock.

“He’s the alpha,” I added. “Oh, and I got held hostage by a vampire, too.”

Becca looked at me, horrified, and I shrugged. “Please tell me you finally got to experience shifter sex.”

She groaned, holding her head. “No, when he told me, I freaked out and demanded he leave.” She blew out a breath. “I don’t even care, really. I’m just upset he kept something like that from me.”

“Don’t go too hard on him. Ford slept with me before telling me, remember. It’s worth something that Randy wanted you to know before that.” I watched her nod thoughtfully. “Don’t forgive him too fast either, though; let him grovel for a bit.”

She cracked a smile. “How are things with your mom?”

“Fine,” I said with a shrug, “she’s just having a hard time with me leaving and her being alone.”

“So we still on for dinner Friday?” she asked.

“Um, shit. I think so. I better double check,” I admitted, that little detail having completely slipped my mind.

I texted my mom, who immediately responded that dinner was still a go. I hesitated; should I tell her half of the guests would be shifters? Eh, probably not. It was more fun this way. I did ask her what she wanted me to bring.

Chapter 10

“Mom! I told you, too much oil!” I yelled, opening a window to air out the house. Ford and I had gotten there early to help my mom set up. He was currently on an ice run. It felt nice being back and being around Mom again. A tightness I hadn’t even known I was carrying was easing.

“Oil is how you make fried chicken!” she yelled back at me.

“Did Becca say she and Randy would be joining us?” Mom asked.

“She is, but she wasn’t sure when Randy will be here. Apparently, he has some domestic issues to clear up.”

“Domestic issues?” my mom asked, replacing the grease cover over the chicken.

I shrugged, going to set the dining room table. “It’s her business, Ma.”

“She wouldn’t tell you?”

“Not even under the threat of exposing her teenage bikini photos online,” I agreed with a huff, setting down the white plates painted with hummingbirds.

Mom huffed a laugh. “You’d never do that.”

“That’s what she said,” I agreed, not seeing the humor that statement usually brought.

I went back for glasses and then took a look at my work. It was passable, though certainly no magazine was going to request me to decorate for a dining room photo shoot anytime soon.

The doorbell rang. “Don’t run in the house!” my mom yelled after me.

“I’m not running,” I hissed at her, slowing my gait.

Ripping open the door, I smiled at Lionel. “Hey, come on in. Mom’s trying to burn the house down.”

I took over the frying so Mom could accept Lionel’s flowers, leading him into the kitchen.

“Oh Lionel, these are just lovely,” she crooned at the bouquet of roses he handed her with a soft blush on his skin.

“Thank you for having me over,” he said, stiffly polite.

“Thank Penelope, she’s a devil with her matchmaking,” Mom teased.

I rolled my eyes, but winked at Lionel. That earned me a half smile and a good-natured shoulder bump as he walked past.

“Come, let me show you the garden we are always going on about,” my mother prattled on.

I had the chicken resting, the baked potatoes out of the oven. I was just finishing the salad when the doorbell rang again. Not bothering to remove my stained apron, I opened the door to Ford with a bouquet of flowers, ice and a bottle of wine.

“Penelope! Who is it?” My mother had impeccable timing.

“It’s Ford, Mom!” I yelled back.

“Well don’t just stand there letting the flies in, come on in!” she said, rushing forward. I’d like to note also that she took the wine.

“Your name is Penelope,” Ford whispered as we walked toward the kitchen.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Why Penni?” he asked, guiding me by the small of my back.

I shrugged, “Everyone used to call me Penne with an ‘e,’ but that’s a pasta—”

The door opened behind us. “And I got tired of her correcting me, so I started spelling it with an ‘i’ so she’d shut up,” Becca declared, Randy in tow.

“And it just stuck,” I said, smiling.

I went to my bestie, wrapping her in a hug. “I’m so glad y’all are here.”

“I just saw you yesterday,” she complained.

“But it was such a LONG night!” I halfheartedly complained, shooting a wink at Ford. He responded with all male pride in his smile.

Laughing, we made our way to the dining room table.

...

“I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to eat fried chicken again—that was amazing!” Ford said, resting an arm over my chair.

I smiled at Mom. “No one does it like my Momma.”

She dabbed her lipstick. “On so many levels,” she oozed.

“And I’m clearing dishes,” I said to everyone’s laughter.

“Ford, you sit that tight booty back down and let the ladies handle this,” Momma said.

I rolled my eyes. “Please don’t confuse this with gender roles,” I warned them both.

“Why, of course not,” Mom clarified with a smile. “I just want the men well fed and rested for the evening’s festivities.”

I groaned. “Is this how you feel when I talk dirty?” I asked Becca.

“No, this is far more entertaining,” Becca grinned, taking Randy’s dish to the sink.

“Don’t touch my wine glass!” I warned her.

“Girl, don’t worry. I like my fingers right where they are.”

“Poke your bestie one time with an errant knife...” I complained.

“You dropped it on my toe!” Becca reminded.

...

“Details,” Penni said in the kitchen.

Ford turned his attention to the other members of his pack. Lionel leaned forward when the girls turned the radio on.

“Mom, it’s called Pandora, and it’s much better for music, trust me,” Penni complained.

“I don’t want your Pandora, I want my radio,” Amber informed her, adjusting the static until the news came on.

“Thank you for having me on, Simone, I appreciate the opportunity to speak about such an important topic.”

“Governor Vargas, you recently announced your run for president, stating that you have made Saint Ann and all of Missouri a peaceful place for humans, where Supernaturals are controlled. But given the violence and strength the Supernatural community is known for, how can they ever truly be controlled?”

“That’s a great question, Simone. We have put in place some of the strongest laws in the country for dealing with rogue Supernaturals—those that harm humans—and the most comprehensive tracking of all Supernaturals, around the clock.”

“Yet your critics say that not all Supernaturals are being tracked in your home city, is that true?”

“I’m certain there are a few we have missed, but overall, we are keeping our citizens safe and the threat closely monitored.”

“What about Olivia?”

“You’ll have to expand on that question, Simone.” Vargas gave a light chuckle.

“Olivia, the Lead Executioner for the Eastern Supernatural Council. She states that her people will not be registering with you, and that the only reason your laws controlling Supernaturals work is that she’s out killing the rogues.”

“Olivia is an uncontrollable wild card.”

“Is she a Supernatural herself?” Simone asked.

“I don’t know, but I suspect so.”

“So she’s registered on your list.”

“She has been logged into it, yes.”

“But she stated that she refused to be monitored. Are you spying on her residence, Governor Vargas? Against her family’s wishes?”

“No, that would be illegal, of course we aren’t. What we have done is restore order to a city plagued by vampires and shifters. I have ample experience in negotiating with hostile Supernaturals, and if elected president, I will bring our tracking system and our laws to a national scale and keep all human Americans protected. We cannot stand idly by while our species is being exterminated, while our children are being corrupted and our loved ones turned into—”

“Mom, turn that crap off,” Penni yelled.

“Oh honey, the music will be back in a minute,” Amber consoled her.

“Ugh, that guy is an idiot,” Penni complained.

“Well, I’m all for equality for all,” Becca announced, taking another gulp of her wine. “If it ain’t broke, why fix it? They’ve been living among us for like ever, and the word is Olivia kills a lot of shit.”

“How do you know?” Penni questioned.

“She’s on YouTube a lot,” Becca admitted.

“Are you fan girling?” Penni teased.

Becca nodded. “I’m thinking of being her for Halloween.”

The laughter was epic. “Randy, you get to be Logan!” Becca yelled, way too loudly for shifter ears. It was good cover, though.

“Who is Logan?” Amber asked.

“Olivia’s mate and the leader of the shifters in the US,” Becca said, refilling her glass.

“Ooh, maybe we can all go themed,” Amber said to the girls’ shared moan.

Undaunted, Amber shifted easily back into happy hostess mode. “Lionel, why don’t you pick out a game for all of us to play on the patio? It’s such a lovely night, I’d hate for it to go to waste!”

“Yes ma’am,” he agreed, instantly cringing at his own word choice.

“Sugar, you call me ma’am again, and I’ll truss you up in the red room and whip you,” Amber said, not laughing.

“She’s serious!” both the girls yelled.

Ford had never seen a shifter turn so white.

...

Lots of booze consumed and several games played, I was lying contentedly on a lounge chair on the patio, fingers interlaced on my stomach.

“I’m leaving,” Becca slurred.

“Randy okay to drive?” I asked, sitting up and regretting the sudden movement.

“I’m good,” Randy said, steadying Becca. “Thanks for inviting us over.”

“We seem to have turned a corner, Randy, and in the effort of not ruining that, I will not bring up the fact that I will definitely castrate you if you hurt her. But I did bring it up, because I’m drunk and well, crap.” Tact has never been a strength of mine.

Randy gave me a hesitant smile. “We’re good.”

“Becca, he said we’re good,” I yelled.

“Stop yelling at me!” Becca complained as she hugged me and yelled in my ear.

“Bye,” chorused around as they made their way out.

“Lionel, would you be a dear and go in and grab the bottle of scotch?” Mom asked sweetly.

Ford had gone inside to take a phone call, so I assumed Mom was doing this to create alone time for us.

Once the door closed, she asked, “Do you care if he spends the night?”

“As long as you don’t fuck like bunnies on the kitchen table, no. Do you care if Ford does? I don’t want to drive back.”

“Same answer. I don’t want to see what my dryer goes through when I’m not around.”

I laughed, lying back down with my eyes closed. “Deal.”

...

Mom and Lionel had retired, taking the bottle of scotch with them.

Ford eventually came back out, sitting next to me.

“Guess I should go?” he said, running the pads of his fingers over my arm.

“Can we stay? I just want to fuck you and crash,” I said, my eyes still closed.

He chuckled, “I doubt your mom would approve.”

“Mom and I made a deal: no sex outside our rooms, and both y’all can stay,” I said, snuggling closer to him.

Ford laughed, “That seems scandalous.”

I leaned up, my face inches from his. “Although technically, we didn’t say anything about the patio.”

“Woman,” he growled, his eyes dipping to my lips.

I moved my hand to the bulge growing between his thighs.

“Ford,” I whispered, kissing the shell of his ear, “lie down, let me suck you. Cum in my mouth, please.” I drew the last word out.

He groaned, his hand on the back of my neck, holding me still as he kissed me thoroughly. Firmly, he pushed me back down, wiggling down until we were lying facing each other.

With a slow hand, I slipped under his shirt, undoing the button of his jeans before agonizingly slowly inching the zipper down. His massive girth sprung free of his boxers and I moaned in delight, wrapping a hand around his thickness.

“Baby,” he whispered, nuzzling my neck, his hips moving against me.

“Tell me yes,” I whispered into his ear. “Tell me you want to fuck my mouth.”

“Yessss.” His hips pressed forward and I felt his precum against my palm as I carefully worked it around his head. I didn’t need to injure the guy before we got upstairs. Although he might like it a little rough.

I clamped my hand around him before stroking, and he jerked against me. Now to see if it was in pleasure or pain.

“Fuck yes, suck me baby, let me fuck your mouth.”

Holy mother of fuck I was wet. Wiggling myself down, I met his gaze before I licked my lips and drew him in. He jerked again, whispering words of enjoyment.

...

Ford was doomed. There was no way in hell he was ever going to say no to anything Penni ever wanted, ever again. She had just begged to blow him.

It was a skill she was fucking proficient in, too. His wolf rumbled to the surface, angry and jealous at those she had been intimate with before, for there would be none after him.

Penni ran her tongue around his dick and he and his wolf forgot about everything except that moment. She leaked saliva down his shaft, using her hand to work it in and around him, a touch of force in her palm leaving him breathless.

Her suction increased, and her depth had him wondering, could she do it? Fuuuccckkk, she took him all in.

...

His eyes widened when I first deep throat him, then fell shut as he went rigid under me. I smiled, well not really, but I enjoyed his enjoyment in this act. It didn't hurt that I knew he'd fuck me all night if I requested it.

Slowly and steadily, I built the speed, until he was quickly murmuring encouragements. He fisted my hair, bowing forward from the waist up. "Fuck, baby," he groaned out.

I pulled back, removing him from my throat, swallowing down what was left before sucking one last time, gently, enjoying the shiver of pleasure that shook his body.

"Fucking hell, woman, get up here," he whispered.

I tucked him back into his pants, not wanting to give Mom or Lionel a possible show.

Ford exhaled before turning to me and drawing me closer for a kiss. I couldn't contain my passion and fisted his shirt. I was sure he needed time to recharge, but dammit, I needed him.

"Woman, you have no idea what you do to me," he murmured.

...

It was late Saturday morning, and I had yet to see my mom or Lionel. We had dropped off breakfast at Mom's bedroom door but apparently, they weren't coming out to offer Ford a "thanks for cooking."

There was some action movie on TV, but I wasn't paying much attention. Curled up into Ford's side, I kept dozing off.

He roused me after a while. "Let's get home. I can hear them going at it again."

I laughed, heading to grab our stuff.

...

Driving home, I had my window down as I enjoyed the slow pace Ford was taking, happy that things, for the moment, were working out. Granted, there were still a group of crazy-ass witches and a potentially bewitched vampire on the loose.

"We should see a movie tonight," Ford suggested as we drove by a theater advertising a new action film.

"And dinner?" I asked with a smile.

"A normal date," he chuckled.

I shrugged. "I'm certain we've done this whole thing backwards, but happy there is more here than epic sex."

Ford captured my hand, brushing soft kisses against my knuckles. A lazy smile curved my lips, content with a perfect moment.

"That was a profound confession."

"I know, I must be in a mood," I teased.

...

Showered and dressed, we ate at a local Italian joint, The Stuffed Olive. Ford escorted me out with a warm hand on the small of my back as I held my stomach and groaned, "I shouldn't have gotten that second dessert."

Ford laughed as we approached the nearby theater, his thumb running small circles over my hip as he held me close to his side. I smiled up at him, my middle going all gooey but this time, I actually enjoyed the sensation.

It figures that would be the exact moment his phone rang. I watched his face fall and then tense up as he checked the screen.

"I gotta take this," he muttered. We stepped away from the movie theater entrance.

"What is it?" Ford growled. I took my own phone out to check it, not wanting my forced eavesdropping to be any more obvious.

"Dammit. We'll be right there," he snapped, taking my arm and turning us away from the theater. I looked back, releasing a sigh.

"Yes, *we*, I don't have time to take her home." With that, he hung up, the muscles of his jaw twitching.

His powerful stride took us away from completing the peaceful date night we had envisioned. Once the truck doors had closed, I unleashed the question rattling around in my brain.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

"We got a lead on another witch's circle tonight." Ford peeled out onto the main drag, watching his mirrors closely.

"Like, it's currently happening?" I clarified. I mean, I assumed so, given our speed.

"Yeah," he clipped out. "When we get there, you stay in the truck, no matter what happens. I'm not letting that damn vampire get his hands on you again," Ford ended in a growl.

I nodded, my overly full stomach souring.

...

The highway disappeared behind us, the darkness absolute. I leaned forward, looking at all the stars jumping to life without light pollution. We tore down the backcountry road, spraying dirt, Ford apparently not concerned about the bumps and ruts affecting his truck. I held onto the oh-shit handle until the high beams illuminated Lionel's truck. Slamming his own truck into park, Ford pulled me close, an urgent and demanding kiss on his lips.

"Do not get out of this truck. If I'm not back in an hour, leave and get help." His chocolate gaze pierced to my soul before he slammed his lips against my own.

My heart was in my throat as I watched him stand by the open driver's door, illuminated only by the dome light. He made quick work of removing his clothing, piling it on the bench seat before hitting the lock and closing the door quietly.

I exhaled a shaky breath, my gaze riveted to him as I moved over to watch his shift. His head bowed as the corded muscles on his neck moved and thick fur sprouted down his bare arms. Hips tilting, arms

lengthening, his entire body became a mass of shifting muscle and realigning bones. Thick espresso fur covered his body in an instant, while his front paws had tufts of white.

My mouth hung open in shock as he darted off into the woods. I sat back hard in my seat, my mind replaying the scene I had just witnessed. I wondered if it hurt. Like, it had to, right?

My nervous gaze swung around the darkened forest, my imagination having a field day with all the shadows. I cut the headlights, adjusting the AC warmer as I found myself fighting off a strange chill in the Alabama summer.

...

Ford knew Penni was watching him shift, and he wasn't entirely sure this was how he wanted her to see it. He embraced his wolf, he wasn't ashamed. And as she had said, their relationship had evolved beyond the physical, and he and his wolf were both enjoying it. Still, it was a shocking transformation to witness, and he hoped it didn't scare her off.

...

Five minutes passed, ten minutes passed, and the forest stayed dark and silent, unwilling to give me a hint as to what was going on. I folded up Ford's clothing, setting it on the dashboard so I could press my face against the driver's side window, searching the endless murkiness.

Fucking hell.

Fifteen minutes, and I cracked the window to see if I could hear better.

Nothing.

...

Ford stalked towards the scents in the air, close enough to use pack bonds to talk to Lionel.

How did you find them? he asked.

Lucky break, Lionel responded.

Coming even with the alpha, Ford took in the scene in front of him. The victim's dark hair spilled onto the grassy circle the witches had formed around her. Candles flicked shadows over faces hidden deep in hooded robes. Ford noted the white-robed female and vampire off to the side.

He hated leaving Penni behind and unprotected. He hated the fact he had to choose between pack and her. If only she was pack ... the thought bounced around his head. Would she want that? Certainly, their relationship now had limitations. Ford was already old by her measure of time, but over the rest of her life, he would only age maybe five or ten human years. He didn't want to outlive her. In fact, it shot an arrow of pain straight through his heart just thinking of losing her. His emotions certainly warranted careful consideration. The process of becoming a shifter wasn't guaranteed, either. He could lose her in the change.

Lionel bumped Ford's brown shoulder with this own gray one, chuffing at him. Ford nodded, turning his attention back to the witches.

When are we breaking up the party? Ford asked.

Soon, I want to see if we can gather any proof of what the vampire claimed, Lionel answered.

Ford settled down, easing the cramping in his legs while staying ready to strike as he analyzed the scene. The vampire's blond hair was either bed-head styled or disheveled. His piercing blue eyes watched the

witches closely. Ford followed that gaze to a woman facing the vampire and white-robed woman, her back to the wolves.

I'm going to move around and see if there is a power element, something like Penni read about for the controlling spell, Ford sent to Lionel.

Lionel nodded, keeping his eyes locked on the scene in front of them.

Slowly, with the stealth of the highly intelligent and experienced predator he was, Ford made it around to see the circle from the opposite side.

The dark-haired sacrifice in the middle was bleeding at her temple and had fang marks marring her neck, but at least her breathing was even. Lifting his gaze to follow the vampire's eyes, Ford watched the woman reading from a book in a language he didn't understand.

What he did note was the large purple jewel, set in gold, hanging around her neck. He was closer to the vampire now, but no longer able to see the supposedly enchanted one's facial expressions.

There is a jeweled necklace, Ford relayed to Lionel. It didn't prove anything either way, yet.

The book closed with a heavy thud and one of the other robed participants took it away while the jewel wearer set her hood back, a smug smile of satisfaction on her vibrantly painted red lips. Blond hair spilled out of the hood, framing her face. Ford noted that she wasn't unattractive, except for the scowl that drew her ugly out in spades.

"We have called this circle for the injustices done to our kind. To find those fellow witches whom Olivia, the Executioner, let the Fae take. We shall avenge their kidnapping, and return them home with us. Let us open a portal to Fae and find our missing sisters."

Ford's eyes were locked onto her as she stepped closer to the sacrifice. A dagger was brought forward, along with a gold-and-jewel encrusted chalice. Setting the cup in front of the sacrifice's face, the leader slipped the thick gold chain off her neck, carefully placing it in the chalice. With a groan of effort, she gripped the sacrifice's dark hair, pulling it up and angling the woman's head over the cup.

NOW! Lionel roared.

Ford burst through the undergrowth, snapping at the leader, moving her away from her innocent victim and the jewel, just in case that turned out to be accurate research.

The witches screamed and scattered.

The leader looked down at him, a snarl on her lips. "You will not deny me this!" she screeched at him.

She closed her eyes, summoning a ball of red energy in her hand. Ford stared at it, uncertain, until it caught fire. He dodged left, the burn of the flames scorching his tail. He growled, watching her go for the jewel.

He pounced again, teeth digging into the soft flesh of her side. Although he had gotten mostly cloth, he shook his head anyway, the little flesh he did have tearing from her body.

Breaking free, Ford lunged at a male witch who dared to take advantage of the distraction, catching him in a crouch as he reached for the jewel. Ford's massive jaws snapped around his prey's neck, tearing the delicate flesh, spilling blood over Ford's snout and onto the jewel below them.

Shit, he sure hoped that didn't stick.

Tossing away the bleeding-out witch, Ford turned his attention back to the ringleader. Finding her absent, he pawed the ground to see where she had gone, internally debating if he was going to chase the prey or protect the sacrifice. In the end, he stayed with the jewel and the innocent victim.

Lionel had four bodies surrounding him on the ground as they shared a look.

She got away, Ford told Lionel.

The jewel? asked Lionel

Got it, Ford answered.

Lionel nodded before shifting. Ford went back to the hostage, cutting her ties carefully with a claw before licking her face. Her breathing was shallow and he didn't want to risk alarming her further with the sight of a naked man standing or squatting his business in front of her.

His gaze traveled to the jewel and he picked up the chain carefully, dragging it to Lionel.

Lionel stood, taking the jewel before walking toward the white-robed woman and the vampire.

"Who are you?" Lionel asked the vampire first.

"Edwin, I've already given you my story. This here is Jaelle, she's a necromancer." Edwin met Lionel's gaze unwaveringly and Ford gave a low growl.

Lionel turned to Jaelle. "Is that accurate?"

"It is, and I am fucking tired of being kidnapped by witches!" she yelled.

Ford growled lowly.

"Easy, wolf. Call Olivia, we have a working relationship," Jaelle stated in irritation.

Lionel and Ford shared a look. *No "thank you" here*, Lionel thought.

"Why did the witches want you?" Lionel asked, still uncertain.

"In case their idiotic brethren have died over in Fae, they sought me to re-animate them," Jaelle answered with a huff.

"Why are they in Fae?" Lionel pushed.

Jaelle turned her tired gaze to Ford's inquisitive look. "They bled Olivia and opened a portal to Fae. However, they summoned the worst Fae monster imaginable, and he took the entire coven as payment for being bothered."

Lionel sighed, rubbing his neck. "Why here?" he finally asked.

"I don't know," Jaelle answered, turning to Edwin. He shrugged.

We need to get the hostage to safety, Ford thought to Lionel.

Lionel nodded. "We need to get her to safety and then we can discuss this further."

Edwin looked down at the jewel in Lionel's hands. "It was recharged," he stated. "We cannot move until you instruct us to."

"Well, fuck," Lionel grumbled.

"Our sentiments exactly," Jaelle groaned.

...

Forty-nine minutes later, and I'd counted every second, Ford exited the woods in wolf form, followed by Lionel carrying a woman, along with the vampire who had accosted me and a tall woman in a pearl white robe.

I busted out of the truck to Ford, my long legs swallowing up the distance between us. Falling to my knees, I wrapped my arms around his furry neck, inhaling deeply, ignoring the sting of tears and what they could mean for me. I pulled back, searching his eyes. "Are you okay?" I whispered.

He chuffed before bumping my shoulder with his massive head, then moving behind me to the truck and his clothing.

I felt helpless watching everything unfold.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked Lionel, my gaze riveted to the vampire, who pressed his sliced wrist to the dark-haired woman's mouth, feeding her his blood. She groaned, her dirt-stained hands coming up to clutch his arm.

"Enough," the vampire growled, tearing his wrist away. She grabbed for it, but he easily pulled out of her desperate grasp.

I backed up a step, watching the woman blink into consciousness.

"What happened? Where am I? What did you do to me?!" she screamed, twisting and kicking to get away from Lionel and the vampire.

"Easy, easy," the vampire attempted.

"Fuck you! You kidnapped me!" she screamed.

The vampire acknowledged that with a tilt of his head. "You want to try?" he asked me.

I stepped forward, noting that Lionel was having a trying time holding her.

"Hey, hey," I whispered, reaching out to her cautiously, "we're here to help."

Her piercing gaze roved over me. "Where are the robed bitches?"

"Dead," Lionel answered. "A few scattered," he added.

She pushed out of Lionel's grasp, and I backed up, giving her space.

"Who the fuck are you?" she demanded.

"The cavalry?" I attempted.

My lame joke appeared to appease her a little. "I need to call my family," she finally said, her voice softening as the entire situation hit her like a ton of bricks.

"Sure, my phone is in the truck." I offered a hand to help her stand.

Her grip was surprisingly strong. I gave thought to offering her more assistance, but the vamp blood seemed to be doing wonders.

"Pleasure to see you again," the vampire smiled to me, revealing brilliantly white teeth and extended fangs. I met his ambered gaze, not uttering a word. Never show weakness to bullies. Ever.

Ford pressed a quick kiss against my temple before going to talk with the others. I watched his delectable backside walk away before returning to my charge, who hadn't missed my wandering gaze.

"He's really good in bed," I confessed. "What's your name?"

"Wendy," she said on a sigh, climbing into the truck after I found my phone and handed it over.

"I'll give you some privacy," I said, backing away to the front of the truck. I didn't want to go too far. If she got curious and started snooping, she would find some pretty racy pictures stored on that phone.

"You need to call her now, rather than later," the white-robed woman counseled Lionel. "The human police have no jurisdiction here, it's a Supernatural problem."

Ford sighed. "They've killed humans, they kidnapped this one. It's not clear cut."

"I have to agree with Jaelle," the vampire said, giving the tall female a name. "The Supernatural Council is our best bet, and even then I am reluctant to get them involved."

Lionel pulled his phone out with a grunt. "Fuck it, let the higher-ups sort this shit out."

He held his phone to his ear and three, well four, pairs of expectant eyes watched him closely.

"Darren, this is Lionel, alpha of the Sumter Pack. We have a problem," he began.

Lionel retold the events efficiently, grunted a reply and hung up.

"Well?" Jaelle asked. "Do enlighten those of us without superior hearing."

"They'll be here before dawn," the vampire stated.

"Amazingly, Edwin is telling the truth," Ford said. So that was his name.

Wendy came around the truck, handing me my phone. "So what now? Can I go?"

Lionel nodded. "Of course, Ford and Penni will take you anywhere you want to go."

Wendy nodded cautiously.

"I'll take these two back to my place and we'll wait there until Darren or Logan or whoever's coming arrives." Lionel turned to go, but Edwin and Jaelle stayed rooted.

"You have to command us," Edwin reminded him.

"Oh, right. Shit, this is creepy. Let's get in the truck, you two."

"What the heck is up with that?" I asked Ford, slipping into the back seat and motioning Wendy to take shotgun.

"You were right about the jewel," Ford began, turning over the engine, "they are bound to that stone. I may have saved Wendy here, but I ripped out one of the witch's throats right over the gem. So the power of the stone was renewed."

"Ugh, that sounds fitting," I muttered.

"More than," Wendy said. "How many got away?"

"Six," Ford said, "including the leader."

Wendy let out a shaky breath. "We will get them. With added reinforcements, they won't go far," Ford assured her.

Wendy nodded and I reached to squeeze her shoulder.

...

We dropped Wendy at her mom's house, about an hour away from where we found her. I left her with my number and Ford's in case she needed anything. She asked to be updated on when the witches were put down.

Driving back, I looked at Ford in the stark darkness of the back roads. "Who is Darren?" I asked.

"Darren is the Southern Compass Alpha. He's in charge of all the packs down here. He reports to his brother Logan, who runs the entire US Shifter Nation."

"Dang," I muttered. "What now?" I asked.

"Let's head home, get some rest. We can head over to Lionel's in the morning." I nodded, taking his hand and scooting closer.

...

One of our phones was ringing, jarring me from sleep. We both silently agreed to ignore it, until the irritating buzzing continued again and again. I groaned, rolling over to check mine.

"It's yours, babe," I complained

He slapped the table on his side of the bed until he connected with the electronic annoyance in question.

"What?" he growled into the phone. I snuggled closer to him, kissing his back.

"Yeah, we'll be there."

"Lionel?" I questioned.

"Lionel," he agreed.

"Why are they waking us up all the time?" I groaned.

Ford laughed, rolling over so I easily fit under his chin as I nestled against his chiseled chest. My body reacted on its own, pushing closer to him.

"Probably because we spent a few hours—what did you call it? Oh yeah, 'unwinding,'" he teased, dropping a kiss against my temple.

I giggled, "I don't suppose we have that kind of time today."

"Nope, Olivia and Logan are already here."

"Awesome," I muttered.

...

Voices were raised when we got to Lionel's. Ford didn't bother knocking, opening the door and guiding me in. I watched Randy and Lionel facing off against the largest man I had ever seen. Next to him, possibly the most beautiful woman I have ever witnessed scowled at it all with full lips and clear, sea green eyes.

"That still doesn't fucking explain why you waited so fucking long to call us!" she yelled.

"Olivia," Randy began in his irritating, let-me-explain-how-the-world-works tone.

“Motherfucker, talk down to me again, and you will be talking with your ass!” she yelled at him, stepping forward.

Logan, I was assuming, looked up at the ceiling again. “Let’s just take it from the top. What happened first?”

Lionel turned, seeing us. “Ford, take over,” he growled, heading outside.

“Too much alpha going on,” Ford muttered to me.

“Oh, gotcha,” I whispered back.

“And who do we have here?” Logan asked.

Randy turned. “No one, get her out of here.”

“Asshole,” I hissed.

“She stays, but do answer the question,” Olivia said, turning to me and rubbing the bridge of her nose.

“I’m Penni, this is Ford,” I said, stepping around Randy.

I narrowed my eyes at him before returning my attention to the two in front of us.

“Ford, is Randy needed at all?” Olivia asked.

Ford huffed a laugh.

“That’s a no, you’re dismissed,” Olivia said flatly, making a shooing motion.

Randy’s face was one of priceless shock. He turned to Logan, who crossed his massive arms. Clearly, the wrong place to turn for sympathy. “You heard her,” he said flatly.

I laughed when the front door closed behind Randy. “That was amazing.”

“He can still hear you,” Ford warned.

I shrugged, taking a seat on the couch. “Oh wait, can I sit, or am I supposed to wait for you to sit first?”

Olivia gave me a confused look. “No—I mean, wait, what?”

“Okay, just checking.”

Logan sat in the large armchair while Olivia perched on the arm, Logan’s massive tree trunk of an arm snaking around her waist protectively.

“Same question, when did this begin?” Logan asked Ford.

Ford sighed, coming to sit next to me. He looked down at our interlaced fingers and I cocked my head at him. Finally, he began, “We had problems with the witches, messing with our territory, leaving their trash behind, marking trees and the ground. We upped security and added cameras, and then had a dead body. But we’ve also had territory issues with the northern pack, for a while.”

Seeing my confusion at Ford’s behavior, Olivia explained, “It’s the alpha thing.” I turned to look into the sea green eyes watching me. “Ford can’t make eye contact with Logan for too long.”

“Oh, thanks Olivia,” I said

“Call me Olie.” I smiled and nodded.

Ford detailed the rest of what the pack had discovered, leading up to finding Wendy, Edwin and Jaelle the night before.

“Damn Jaelle, how does she keep getting kidnapped?” Olie muttered.

“At least there were no silver chains this time,” Logan offered.

Olie nodded with a smile. “True, but this gem, it sounds like a doozy.”

“It sounds Fae in origin,” Logan rumbled.

“I fucking hate when you say shit like that,” Olie hissed.

“I found a reference to it in one the books the witch Larry dropped off,” I offered.

“See, Logan, not the fucking Fae,” Olivia scolded.

“Unless you consider that the witches are—”

“Shut your face.”

Logan smiled, snapping his teeth at the fingers Olie had pressed against his lips.

“Damn lion,” she muttered, breathless.

“OMG, they’re just like us,” I whispered to Ford.

He laughed, shaking his head.

“Let’s go see the prisoners,” Logan announced ... demanded, decreed? I was uncertain how to classify his tone, I just knew it was a command and it would be obeyed.

We ended up in the basement in a cement cell.

“Hey Jaelle, witches getcha again?” Olie greeted the white-robed figure, glaring daggers at her.

“They’re a vile bunch. I do hope you think about exterminating them,” she growled.

Ford opened Jaelle’s cell.

“Can’t do that. Well actually, I have pitched the plan, but everyone says it’s a bad idea,” Olie said with a shrug.

Ford glanced at her, alarmed, before releasing Edwin from his cell.

“Oh, vampire, you’re a basketful of trouble,” Olie stated. Logan grunted, I assumed in the affirmative.

“My dear Olivia, you look exceptionally well, love the longer hair,” Edwin began.

Logan stepped between them. “What House are you in?”

“I *was*,” Edwin said, with heavy emphasis on the second word, “in Zachariah’s house, until he was terminated.”

“Terminated by Logan,” Olie filled me in.

“Oh, gotcha. That’s awkward,” I muttered.

Olie shrugged and Edwin answered, “I am quite happy to be free. I’m sure you’ve heard how appalling some Master Vampires can be.”

“We have,” Logan agreed. “That doesn’t convince me of your status, though, or that you don’t have other agendas.”

“I most certainly have agendas, I’m a vampire after all,” Edwin chuckled. Logan growled, showing teeth.

“The jewel should be able to force him to tell the truth,” I blurted out. They all turned to look at me.

Olie’s gaze was piercing, but she cocked her head with a slight smile. “Good thinking.”

Edwin’s glare was just as unnerving. I shrugged, “What? You did hold me hostage.”

“I let you go,” he snarled.

I shrugged again. “Meh.”

“Enough. The human has a point,” Logan growled. “Where is the necklace?”

“Lionel has it,” Ford explained.

We all went to fetch Lionel from the backyard.

“Wow,” Olie commented, “this is nice.”

Logan looked at her with a slight grin. “It’s because there are no kids screaming and running around.”

“No, what makes it quiet and peaceful is ... uh ... okay, it might be the lack of my minions,” Olie laughed.

“Y’all have kids?” I asked.

Logan rolled his eyes. “It’s a long story—”

“Yes, we have lots of kids; one his, mostly orphans I rescued,” Olie neatly explained.

“That’s nice,” I commented.

Lionel held out the jewel to Logan.

“Edwin, what House do you belong to?” Logan demanded.

“I don’t have a House,” Edwin ground back. Yeah. That had to be frustrating, having your freedom stripped away by a stone.

I brushed against Ford’s arm as Logan started asking other questions about the witches. “I’m going to find that book that mentioned the jewel,” I whispered.

He nodded, his jaw set hard and his gaze firmly locked onto the vampire.

...

Ford was having a hard time controlling his wolf around the vampire. Edwin had threatened what was his. He had cast light upon a weakness Ford had never known, a weakness named Penni.

“So let’s go back to the witches, do you know their names? The ones who are alive?” Olivia asked.

“No,” ground out Edwin.

“They kept us in a rundown house, outside of town,” Jelle explained. “At first they only needed us once a week, then it became more often. I’m assuming they were getting closer to what they were searching for. Plus, having both of us bound to one stone drained the souls they were utilizing. At first the victims

were drunks, drug addicts, homeless people, but the leader started experimenting with the quality and received longer-lasting results with stronger victims.”

Olie groaned, “Fucking witches. Seriously, Logan, why can’t I kill them off again?”

“That is a discussion for another time,” he rumbled. “What were they after?”

Jaelle shrugged and Edwin did the same. Olie narrowed her sea green gaze at him. With an exaggerated sigh, Edwin explained, “They never called it by name. In their spells, it was always an object of great power, luminescent and pointed to the heart of truth. We moved locations, three times, I believe until we ended up here.”

“What the fuck?” Olie muttered, chewing her bottom lip.

“We should call Jerry,” Logan suggested, looking to his mate.

She sighed. “Not yet, he and Mark are still settling in with the new baby.”

“It’s been three months, you can’t keep using that excuse.”

“Watch me,” she taunted with a smile.

Ford scented Penni and turned as the door opened. “Hey, what did you find?”

...

“Well, I think I may have a tentative solution to the controlling jewel,” I said.

“I’m really okay with it continuing to work on the vampire,” Olie said.

I gave her an uncertain stare. Olie relented, sighing, “Alright, what do you have?”

“Well, usually, the only ways to release them would be to either let it wear out or to have the original spell caster recall it. Except, there’s also another option.” My gaze flicked to Ford; he wasn’t going to like this.

“A human can take on the counterweight of the spell and eliminate the jewel,” I finished.

“What stops him from killing you?” Ford growled, with a nod of his head toward Edwin.

“He in turn would die. Our life forces would be connected until the full moon.” Sounded impressive. Too bad I had no idea when that was.

“Two weeks,” Lionel ground out.

“No,” Ford said, taking the book from me. “Let it wear out.”

Logan sighed. “It’s actually not a bad option. It protects her, while keeping him in check. Sorry Jaelle, you’re just along for the ride.”

“I know, I know. No more online dating sites.” She shrugged dejectedly.

“Jaelle, you need to let me fix you up,” Olie said with a smirk.

“You stay out of her dating life,” Logan warned.

“Pfft, come on, I can’t do any worse than she’s been doing so far,” Olie retaliated.

“She does have a point,” Jaelle admitted. “Anyway, it would be in our best interest to be tied to someone—a person, not something that can be moved around. I do not want that bitch controlling me again. Edwin?” she turned to him.

He was busy glaring daggers at me, and I was glaring right back. His ambering eyes and peeking fangs didn’t scare me. Okay, a little, I’ll admit, but dammit if I was backing down.

“What is required?” Olie asked, her hand outstretched to Ford, who was fuming.

He waited a heartbeat before handing the book over, the pause going unnoticed.

Well, almost unnoticed. Logan was staring at him intently. Noticing the big man’s gaze, Ford walked away a few paces.

“Herbs,” Olie muttered, “power stones, coven, blood. I can totally do this,” she announced proudly, snapping the book closed with a confident smirk.

Logan sighed, tipping his head back, apparently searching for patience in the sky. “Can we please call your father?”

“Logan, where is your confidence in me? I’m your mate!” she smarted off to him, a smile on her plush lips.

“That would be why, Olie. I’ve watched you get dragged off into another dimension twice. Call your father, or I will.” His caramel gaze intently challenged her.

“Who do you think you are to boss me around?” she demanded. I took a step back.

Apparently, all power couples had power issues.

“Olivia,” Logan’s voice dropped until I couldn’t hear it. Certainly the Supernaturals could, but whatever he said, she laughed, tossing her strawberry hair back.

“Fine, I agree to your terms,” Olie stated, shaking Logan’s hand. The whole exchange left me confused.

“Come on, Penni, you ready for this?” she inquired with one raised eyebrow.

I nodded, my queasy stomach and intense pit sweat leaving me fairly certain I wasn’t.

“Front and center, everyone.” Olie cracked her neck, opening the book. “Let’s get this party started,” she muttered more to herself than the semi-circle that had formed around her.

Ford wandered back to watch and it was reassuring to have him there.

“What about the herbs and power stones?” I asked tentatively, fighting the urge to raise my hand.

Olie gave me a shit-eating grin. “I pack more power than the average witch. We should be fine.”

“Should?” I squeaked.

She winked before turning serious, her gaze unfocused. The air dropped in temperature, a soft breeze brushing against my tied-up hair. I looked around, hearing the silence around us.

Olie held the book in one hand and the jewel in the other, turning toward me. Her brow furrowed as she let the book fall from her grasp and pulled a dagger from her waist.

“Just a few drops,” she reassured me.

I nodded, holding out my hand cautiously, hearing Ford’s rumbling behind me, followed by Logan’s.

The gleaming blade left my mouth dry and my heart rate accelerated. The press of the sharp steel forced a gasp from my lips, my gaze riveted to the blood welling up on the pad of my thumb. Olivia brought my thumb to the gleaming stone, smearing my dark blood across its purple-faceted face.

Still she didn't say anything, just kept her sea green gaze focused on the stone and my hand, which she still held.

With a snap, I felt the spell settle against my chest. Disoriented, I stumbled back to be braced by Ford, who gently helped me sit down. The world spun as if I had drunk an entire liquor store, my stomach revolting from the sensations.

"Did it work?" Logan rumbled.

"Yes, it does appear to have," Olie answered. "Oh shit, I forgot this part."

Olie broke the stone and I sucked in a breath, the earth righting itself.

"You forgot?" I hissed at her.

She shrugged like she had forgotten vanilla in a cookie recipe. "My bad. All better?"

Indeed I was. Ford helped me stand, leaving his arm around my middle while I regained my footing.

"Let's test it. Give them a command," Olie requested.

"Clap," I said lamely, rubbing the bridge of my nose. They both obliged and kept doing it.

"Enough." I waved my hand. "This is weird," I muttered. "What happens if they wander from earshot?"

Edwin tested the theory, darting off in a flash.

"Son of a bitch!" Olie screamed. She rounded on me. "Command him back here."

I nodded, tripping over my words. "I, uh, command you to return, Edwin."

We all heard the scream of frustration as Edwin returned just as quickly as he had disappeared.

"Wow," I whispered.

His breathing was labored—more from anger, I was guessing, than an actual need for oxygen. He stood tensely, glaring those ambered eyes at me.

"So what happens in two weeks at the full moon? You find another way to control me?" Edwin demanded of Olivia.

She smiled, stepping ever so close to his fangs. "Hmm, let's see, you're a Houseless vampire, with the Vampire Council currently undergoing 'restructuring.'" I had no idea why she added air quotes. "I think no one gives a shit about you, except me, so I'll do whatever the fuck I want." She smiled, all teeth and zero charm.

"So, random question, but do we have to all stay together?" I asked, hesitantly.

Olivia looked at Logan, who in turn shrugged. "I think keeping Edwin with you will be for the best. Jaelle can come with us until we figure this out."

Jaelle nodded as Ford shifted his weight uneasily behind me. "It's probably best if we stay here," he muttered.

I nodded, rubbing my forehead. "I need to lie down," I groaned.

...

We moved our group to the patio chairs in the backyard. Evidently, someone had the foresight to order food while we were busy doing magic, so I was soon mowing my way through a turkey and Swiss wrap.

Edwin on one side of me and Ford on the other. Awkward much? I chewed thoughtfully. Should I ask Edwin questions, try to put him at ease? Oh, I know, *How does it feel to have a human you threatened now having control over you?*

Yeah, I was probably better off staying silent. But I'm not really into the "better off" thing.

"So, two weeks together? Wanna get best friend necklaces?" I teased.

"How about I give you a permanent necklace?" he taunted right back, allowing his eyes to amber as he bared razor fangs at me.

I had two options here. One, back down and call him the asshole he was. Two, play the game, and do it better.

I smiled. "I'm not sure I've ever seen karma work so damn fast. One day threatening me, the next, my own personal bitch."

He snarled and I could see why. Having one's free will removed couldn't feel good, even if I was a better option than his previous master. Eww, that word just felt wrong.

A tightness pushed through my chest, and I exhaled a breath long and slow before a vise grip crushed my temples. My wrap fell from my hands on a strangled breath.

"She's close," I whispered, reaching for Ford before I tipped right over, following the discarded wrap.

"Who is?" he demanded, fire and wildness riding his voice.

"The leader of the coven," Edwin answered. "She's trying to call me back."

"How the fuck is that possible?" Ford demanded.

Pressure was building in my temples, seeping down to my chest. I placed a hand there.

Edwin's face appeared between dark, blotchy spots. "You have to fight her," he demanded of me. Gone was the smug asshole, instead he appeared desperate, I daresay even scared. "Fight her," he repeated through gritted teeth.

"How?" I whispered, the breath leaving my lungs until my chest felt concave.

I clenched my eyes closed, but Edwin's eyes still haunted me. "How?" I demanded again, my desperation and pain causing me to cry out the word.

Ripping echoed in my ears and I had to plant both hands on the ground to keep from collapsing completely. Ford was yelling, and I could feel his angst, fear, yearning and adoration, damn near love. Wait, what the fuck? How could I feel that?

I focused on the darkness behind my lids, then moved on to shoving against the bonds restricting my breathing. I slammed into them. I think I surprised her, as I was rewarded with a strain-free moment before it all came crashing back, crushing my ribs and grinding my bones. My arms gave out but Ford was there to catch me, not that I recognized what was going on.

Grinding my jaw, breathing through clenched teeth, I shoved again. The bonds didn't break so quickly this time, but I did succeed in easing the grip slightly, enough to feel the ripping again at my heart. Focusing there, I saw the silver cord tinged with hues of purple that she was trying to wrench out of me.

Not today, bitch. My arms came forward, mirroring the fight in my mind, wrapping around the cord and letting it pull taut against my flesh. I rocked back, pulling against her attempt to remove me from the situation.

I grunted, a pained and animalistic sound.

...

"She has to be close!" yelled Lionel. "Find the witch!"

Ford watched his clan shift and move out. Edwin was intently staring at Penni, watching her strange movements with rapt attention.

"What's happening?" Ford asked.

"She's fighting back," Edwin breathed out.

...

I cried out, the cord digging into my flesh until the pressure ripped into my core. My eyes opened then, unseeing for a breath while my brain digested the pain lacing my body.

I heaved a few breaths before snapping back into the battle, which now appeared to be for my own well-being as much as control of Edwin. I followed the cord, playing defense. I innately knew that if I didn't end this battle quickly, she'd win. I had never spent a moment in the realm of magic, nor was I a witch. I was disadvantaged at every level.

Another sound invaded my hearing, a dull thump, and then a curse that wasn't my own. Well, hello, little witchy. She looked like a mass of glowing threads. I was certain a well trained witch, or mage, or Olie, could end this internal fight, but what could I do?

I could smash, and so I did, using my mental force to bash, pull, twist and maim. I heard her scream before I was flung back into my own body.

Gasping for breath, I looked down at my left forearm, seeing the towel Ford was pressing over it.

"Penni! Penni, can you hear me?" he screamed.

I pulled away the towel, looking down at the symbols carved into my skin.

"What the fuck?" I whispered, terrified, looking to Ford.

Chapter 11

“Shit, girl, I have no idea what that shit is.” Olie sighed, sitting back against the couch in Lionel’s living room, where Ford had carried me. “Okay, yeah, time to call my father.” With that, she made the universal “gimme” sign to Logan, who sighed heavily.

“You need to carry a purse or get pockets.”

“The one time I opt to go with less firepower, you’re going to give me shit?” I couldn’t tell if she was annoyed at herself for not being prepared or Logan for bringing it up.

Smiling down at her, he teased, “I like you depending on me.”

“Oh, dammit. That’s the last time I forget my jacket,” she heaved.

He chuckled as she dialed up her dad on video chat.

“Hey Doyle, can you get Dad, please?” Olivia asked.

I was shocked at her tone, it was almost pleasant.

“Hey Dad, do you know what this is?” She hit a button on the screen, turning the camera around to my forearm and the symbols that now spanned it in a spiral that ended above my elbow.

“Who— What—? By all the Gods, Olivia, whose power did you pull?!” he demanded.

She flipped the camera around and pulled the phone closer to her again. “I didn’t do it.” With that, she launched into details of our last few hours.

I rubbed my forehead. *I really need to lie down* was the closest thing to a thought I could muster.

I heard the long-winded sigh on the other end of the conversation. “Let me see the symbols again, Olie,” her dad requested.

Olie turned the camera around again, sweeping slowly over my arm.

With another heavy sigh, her dad demanded to speak with me. I held the phone with my good hand and waited. “What happened to end the fight?” he asked.

“I saw colored threads and I smashed them.” That was what I had seen and felt, but even in my own head, I lacked the vocabulary to describe what I had done.

Olie’s dad had the same sea green eyes as hers, but where her hair was strawberry blond, his was dark, threaded through with silver. Worry etched his features. “I’m truly not sure how to tell you this,” he began, “but I believe you sucked the coven leader’s power into yourself.”

“Wait, so I’m a witch?” I asked, my voice pitching up.

Olivia’s dad shrugged. “In a sense. Witches are descended from the Fae, and therefore their genetic makeup is vastly different from a human’s, so you could never be a true witch. But you will have the same power now. And given that humans can, in fact, access roughly the same power level as a witch, I’d say you might be slightly stronger. Then again, witches are dependent on rituals, herbs, and such, so your knowledge would certainly need to be augmented to make the magic work.”

I sat back heavily against the couch, the phone slipping from my fingers. This was not a part of the fucking plan.

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I must have passed out, which for the record is not something I do a lot. But it seemed my overworked body and mind needed a little break.

Before my eyes even opened, I knew where Edwin was, to the south of the house, and if I followed the connection, I could sense that he was pensive, even contemplative. My left arm pulsed, threads of power throbbing. While Olie's dad had said it wasn't much of a boost yet, I felt invincible and invigorated.

I rolled to a sitting position, seeing Ford sleeping in a chair next to the bed, head tipped back, snoring. I must have been seriously tired to sleep through that.

Rubbing my eyes, I blew out a breath, wiggling up to lean against the headboard. So much had changed in such a short time. My relationship with my mom had broken and been pieced back together, I was banging a shifter, I had control over a vampire who had held me hostage, and I had absorbed a witch's powers.

Well, I'd wanted an epic summer of no regrets before finishing school. I chuckled and the noise woke Ford. He squinted at me through bleary eyes.

"Hey," he grunted, moving to sit next to me on the gray bedding.

I leaned against his shoulder, needing his warmth and strength.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Different," I confessed, "more aware, more vibrant." I struggled to find the exact wording for my newfound vigor. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Almost twelve hours. I was starting to get worried. Olivia assured me you were fine, as did her father, and that your human body was just adjusting to the power boost." He stroked my hair, working around to rub the back of my neck before adding, "It's the same with shifting. Everything is more vibrant, alive, powerful and intense. It can be a lot to manage at first, but now, I couldn't imagine living any other way." I inhaled deeply his spicy scent, contentment seeping into my bones. Would I feel the same way? Would these new powers become something I couldn't live without?

I hesitated and ultimately decided not to tell Ford that I could sense where Edwin was on the property. We were having such a peaceful moment and I wasn't sure how long it would last. No need to spoil it, and after all, Edwin and I would only be tied together for a short time.

Was there any way I could really leave Ford after this summer? The thought of being away turned my stomach and fouled my mood. The thought of him being with someone else had tears springing to my eyes and a jealous rage I didn't know I was capable of rising from my depths.

I blew out a breath, wanting a distraction from my own thoughts. "So, what now?" I asked.

Ford moved to stroke my hair. "Food?" he questioned, his voice a rumble under my ear. "You've missed a few meals."

I smiled and nodded.

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“I vote pizza!” Olie repeated loudly in the living room, sitting again on the arm of the chair while Logan dominated the rest of it. The scent of delicious bacon from the breakfast I’d slept through taunted me, but, not surprisingly, none was left. Dang shifters.

“We have an amazing Mexican joint here,” I suggested, my mouth watering at the thought of salsa and cheese enchiladas. Resting my head on Ford’s chest, I nestled into his clean white shirt. I wasn’t going to think about how rank I must have smelled to their shifter senses in my day-old clothing and a body that hadn’t touched a shower since who knows when.

“I can’t do the onions,” Jaelle said, shaking her head, seated across from us.

I groaned my disappointment.

“What about the deli by the shop?” Ford offered, playing with my unbound hair.

“And what establishment will service my needs?” Edwin asked, tugging his sleeves down. His clothing looked worse than my own.

Silence fell and everyone’s head swiveled to me. Oh shit, right, vampires drank blood. My eyes widened. Did they expect me to feed him?

“Sssshhhiiiiittt,” I hissed out. “Me?” I pointed to myself.

“Human blood is safer. If he drinks from a Supernatural, he will receive a power boost,” Logan explained.

I gulped, sitting up from Ford’s embrace. He glared daggers at Edwin, who was smiling ever so smugly now. Guess he figured he was getting me good.

“Take from her wrist,” Logan decreed.

Well, that was good news.

“And we can have both Mexican and pizza delivered.” It seemed Logan was always going to be the peacekeeper, although the long, drawn-out sigh at the end of his sentence gave a clue to his waning patience.

I blew out a breath, rubbing my right wrist.

“Don’t worry, pretty, it won’t hurt, much.” Edwin’s shit-eating grin really needed to be smacked off.

“Command him to make the bite not hurt, not to harm you in anyway except said bite, not to kill you, not to maim you or anyone else, and not to make you pass out,” Olivia finished.

“Seriously?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Vampires are a crafty fucking lot. They rival the witches for being pains in my ass. Thankfully, I get to kill them, a lot.” She grinned maniacally, showing clear enjoyment at killing the vamps. Considering her job was to police rogue Supernaturals, including vampires, her glee and her warning weren’t increasing my confidence in the situation.

“Okay. Can you repeat that?” I gathered together my strained courage.

She did and I repeated it verbatim to Edwin, whose scowl was growing at each word.

Edwin and I stood in the center of the living room, on display for the other Supernaturals around us. Ford was a tightly coiled ball of manly tension, ready to spring. Olie and Logan watched warily. Jaelle was still watching Family Feud.

I held out my wrist, as far as that appendage would go. It was all terribly intimate and I didn't like it one bit. He watched me intently and I watched his pale blue eyes change, although the smug satisfaction remained. His fangs elongated, popping from his gums with a wet, sucking sound that had me wanting to revolt against this idea.

While every instinct was screaming at me to tuck tail and fucking run, momma didn't raise no coward, even if she did raise a very open-minded sex fiend. So I straightened my spine and ground my jaw, refusing to show weakness to a room full of predators. *Please let this be over quickly.*

Edwin just couldn't stop smiling. He licked his lips, drawing attention back to his pointed fangs and away from his ambered eyes. His gaze never left my own during his slow progression to my offered wrist. He inhaled deeply over the pulse pounding rapidly there.

"Get on with it," Ford hissed from the sidelines.

Edwin snarled, clawed hands gripping my wrist with bruising intensity.

I suppose I had been thinking it might be similar to a needle, since what else did I have for comparison? Nothing. That's what.

I was ill prepared. The bite itself was a shock. The pain of my flesh being separated was brief, but the drawing out of my blood was a sensation both terrifying and oddly erotic.

I gasped, my knees locking into place, head tilting back. "What the fuck?" I hissed. I wanted to pull free, wanted to rip away. No matter the damage to myself, I wanted it to stop.

"Easy, Penni, it will be over soon," Olie counseled.

I pried open my eyes, startled to realize I had squeezed them shut. My breathing was tight and short as I looked at Edwin again. Something shifted in his gaze. The menace and malice were retreating. Pulling away, he licked the wound and I watched it close instantly.

I looked at my wrist, impressed. "It's his blood. Vamps will cut their tongues and heal the wounds they inflict," Olie offered. "At least, that's what they do when they behave."

I nodded, cradling my wrist against my stomach, slowly backing away to the couch where Ford and safety were.

Edwin was still intently staring at me and I didn't know why, since he wasn't staring me into an early grave anymore.

I cleared my throat, not sure how to break the awkward silence or tension in the room. Thankfully, my phone went off. Surprised I still had it in my pocket, I scrambled to get it, almost dropping it like a slippery fish.

"Hey Mom," I greeted her, overly enthusiastically.

"Penelope, you and your friends are all invited down for dinner. Buckin's down the road had their power go out and I have their entire chicken section on my counter and I dare say I can't fit it all!" I laughed at her excitement.

Ford was nodding a vigorous "Yes."

"Olie doesn't eat meat," Logan stated, also hearing the entire conversation.

"Um, we have a vegetarian in the group I'm in." How the fuck was I going to explain this to her? Did I even need to?

“Lord, why would any poor soul make that decision? Never mind, I have a shitload of dessert as well. I suppose I can share,” she conceded. She was trying and I appreciated it.

“I’m in!” Olie announced. Well lovely. Wait, was succubus hearing as impressive as shifters’? Or did the look she and Logan had exchanged mean there was some other superpower I didn’t know about?

I was having mixed feelings about bringing Edwin to my mom’s house, so I commanded a host of behaviors. So many that I was certain I didn’t remember them all, and probably some overlapped and canceled each other out.

Olie said it would be safe, though. Edwin had no House, no magical mind connection that would allow him to speak silently, and his power was limited by my commands. She also said that aside from vampires being assholes, they liked to keep their heads attached at their necks. That, and my mom and I were “just humans,” and therefore didn’t rate high enough on the “to be killed” list. I wondered how we ranked among the “taste test” group. Ugh.

Along with our current crew, we gathered Becca, Randy and Lionel and headed to my mother’s house. It was sure going to be an interesting time, and I lacked my usual relaxed, come-what-may attitude about it.

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Ford knocked on the door ... my door ... my mom’s door? I wasn’t sure what I should or wanted to call it. I was impressed that he had a free hand with the monster load of potatoes, collard greens and additional plates and cutlery I had demanded we pick up and bring.

The door was flung open by the whirlwind of my vibrant mother, flour dusting across her red plaid apron, her strawberry blond hair twisted up. The way she barked orders and rushed us in said panic, but her eyes glittered with delight to be the center of all that attention.

“Hey, Momma!” I greeted her. “I gotta get these bags down!”

“Hey my sweet pea, who are your friends?” Mom asked as people kept walking in the door.

I made the introductions, pointing out Olie, Logan, Jaelle and Edwin.

My mother caught my wrist in hers.

“What the fuck is this?” she demanded, staring down at my engraved wrist. “Did you brand yourself?”

“Brand myself? What even is that? And fuck no. I sucked the power from a witch and got these neat markings.” I smiled as I watched her open-mouthed, disbelieving stare. But my smile quickly left when her probing look suggested she might know more about the supernatural world than I did.

“You what?” my mother screeched, her grip strengthening on my wrist as she dragged the appendage in question up for a closer inspection. “What the fuck does this mean?” she asked, interested and cautious.

“I have some sort of powers now?” I said with a smile. Okay, it might have been more of a grimace, if we are being honest.

“I hate to inquire, but is something burning?” Jaelle called from the kitchen.

“Yes, fucking hell, it is!” my mother bellowed at me. “Check the chicken, I have to tend to the potatoes.”

She was so mad, or perhaps upset at being out of the loop, that I did her bidding in hopes it would earn me a reprieve. Yes, I was grown woman, but my mother angry still scared me.

“Ford, you get those greens started!” she hollered at him.

I chuckled, watching him give me his stink eye. "It'll be worth it," I whispered, knowing he could hear it, before returning my attention to the chicken.

Platters of food were cooked and consumed in the kitchen, everyone eating as food was ready and not bothering with proper plating, taking family style to a whole new level. The conversation flowed as easily as the food did, even though we all hailed from various species, with me a newborn power grabber.

Home felt like home again, and I thought about the summer ending yet again, even though it had just begun and the heat was pure misery. But wasn't this what I'd wanted? One amazing, adventure-filled summer.

I took another sip of my beer.

"Ugh, you smell like a deep fryer, and that's the good part of it," my mother commented. "Come on, I have some of your laundry left."

I took another sip of beer, knowing full well she didn't give a fuck what I smelled like, but also knowing I could use a change of clothing. Her room was a smattering of floral wallpaper, trimmed in pink with white accents. It always smelled like her favorite lavender perfume.

"Here." She took down an old softball t-shirt and tossed it at me.

I gave her an all-knowing stare, catching the garment easily.

"What's up, Mom?" I questioned, sitting on the chest at the end of the bed.

She sat next to me, studying the dishrag she had apparently dragged up there with us.

"I'm worried about you," she confessed.

My initial response was to scoff in her face and demand, NOW she was worried? Now?! I cleared my throat as another response thankfully made it past my lips.

"Why?" I asked.

She shrugged, still entranced by the dishrag. "You've fallen in with a different crowd. You've got witches' symbols on your arm, you're in a relationship with a shifter, and now you're hanging out with the leader of all this insanity."

I narrowed my eyes at her.

"And you're human," she added.

I nodded, true statement.

"I worry they will try and make you like themselves." She looked up at me through tearful eyes. "And I worry I really will lose you."

I lost all my fight in a long exhale as I worked to compose my answer. "Mom, these are good people. Ford has done nothing except keep me safe. Lionel I've known almost my whole life, not to mention how good he is to you. Yes, the whole vampire thing is new, and jacking a witch's power unexpected, but I'm still me. I don't feel the need to shift under a full moon, nor am I requiring blood." I took her hand to still the dishrag abuse. "I know this is a lot, but I like Ford, like a lot, like a lot a lot," I confessed once she looked up at me.

I scrunched my eyes up. "I'm so in trouble with him."

"How far along are you?" she asked in stride.

“I’m not pregnant!” I yelled at her. “God, I’m more careful...” my voice trailed away.

She laughed, “Sugar, how do you think you came into this world?”

“Intercourse,” I deadpanned her.

She laughed again, finally leaving the dishrag alone. “Very, very good intercourse. With a man who made me forget even my own damn name, and especially to use protection.”

“Eww,” I whispered, covering my ears.

“So if you’re not pregnant, yet, what’s the issue?” she questioned.

“That I could be, soon, but that’s not even really it. I like Ford, a lot, the kind of like where we may not have used a condom, and may not again,” I admitted begrudgingly. “What if I leave, and...”

“My little heartbreaker is in danger of having her own heart broken. Aww, sweetie, it was bound to happen eventually, even with potentially dangerous company.” My mother leaned on my shoulder.

I groaned, finally admitting to myself what I had been dancing around. “This isn’t supposed to happen until I’m like thirty-five, until I have a successful career established, can pop out kids and have daddy stay at home with them.”

My mom laughed a deep belly laugh, for longer than I really thought was appropriate. I glared at her.

“Oh, uh...” She regained her composure. “So that was the plan?”

“Yeah?” I asked.

She shook her head with a little smile, standing to kiss my temple. “Life never goes to plan, my love. If you like this boy, don’t run from it. I didn’t raise you to fear anything, especially not yourself.”

I sighed. “But what if he does break my heart?” I whispered.

“It’ll be worth it, my darling. Trust me.”

I paused for a moment. “Was it worth it with Dad?” I whispered.

She sighed, a long, drawn-out sound, and I regretted asking, I really did. “It was, because I got you and I had him, even briefly.”

“What happened to him, Mom?” I turned to see her face.

“He left, baby. That’s all that matters.”

She patted my shoulder once and straightened up. He may have left, but he also left me an impressive trust fund that, well managed, would last into my old age. I stared after her, wanting to know more, my carefully guarded heart demanding it.

But I didn’t know and couldn’t ask. My father had given me life, money and nothing else. The trust fund company had my current address and phone number, and I was certain he could get that information if he asked. Or maybe I hoped he couldn’t. That would make the whole rejection of being left as an infant a lot easier to handle.

Whatever, one man not wanting me did not change my self-worth. It did sting, though, there was no denying that.

We made our way downstairs to a commotion, the squeaking of chairs against the tile, multiple voices talking at once. We rounded into the kitchen and Becca looked over at me, her eyes sparkling.

“We have an idea,” Olie began.

“Given your tone, I don’t think I’m going to like it,” I told her, a little surprised I could confront her like that.

She shrugged. “Logan and I want to make you friends of the pack. It’s a protected status. As a human with a witch’s power, you are in danger from her coven and you only have human law enforcement to fall back upon. But as a friend of a shifter clan, you’d be protected by the entire pack.”

I nodded, not liking that these new powers were again changing things in my life.

“We’re extending it to Becca as well,” Logan added.

“We’re going to have a full moon party to officially welcome you as a witch, and make us friends of the pack, which is a protected and exclusive status!” Becca gleefully repeated.

I forced a smile, only to see Becca’s swiftly retreat. “Um ... Penni, you’re glowing,” she said softly, pointing to my left hand.

I stepped back, looking at my skin. Indeed, a fine purple luminescence bathed my forearms. “Well shit,” I muttered, flexing my hands and seeing the same glow.

“It’s the magic,” Olie offered. “You’ll get better at controlling it. Right now, it’s survival powers coming out.”

I nodded, not hearing or understanding a damn thing she said.

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I ended up slipping out to the porch with a beer for a quiet moment away from the open and all-seeing windows in the kitchen.

“I know you are there,” I muttered to Edwin, currently lurking in the trees in front of me.

He slinked out. “How?” he demanded, not closing the distance between us.

I shrugged, taking a sip of beer.

“Can you do it with Jaelle?” he asked, stepping closer.

I tilted my head, focusing on her. “Yes,” I confirmed.

He nodded, still staring unnervingly at me.

I sighed. “What’s the deal, dude? It’s thirteen days, and you are free of me.”

He scoffed, “Pending you don’t die.”

I rolled my eyes. “No one wants me dead.”

He smiled, and I was certain I wasn’t going to like what was about to come out of his mouth. “You helped destroy a powerful gem, became bound to a vampire and a necromancer, stole a witch’s power and are banging a wolf. Are you really so dense?”

I tilted my head to the side, acknowledging the truth of his statements, but hoping to pick holes in his logic.

“I gotta say, I didn’t take all of that into consideration.” I took a long sip of my beer.

“Novice.” I think he was going for an insult.

“That’s true,” I muttered, looking out into the night. I chewed on my bottom lip. Should I be working on my newfound powers? Truth be told, I guess I’d just assumed things were going to go back to normal after the full moon.

But they wouldn’t. Becca was getting an honorary place among the shifters. And I now had witchy powers; I couldn’t just ignore them, could I?

“You’re glowing again,” Edwin muttered.

I looked down at my hands, now with a soft blue spinning around my fingers.

“That’s interesting,” I muttered, setting down my beer.

“It seems to be triggered by high emotions,” Edwin offered, moving ever so slightly closer.

“Olie said it was survival magic,” I explained.

“Your mood has changed, and the color of your magic as well,” Edwin observed.

Okay, so that was a valid point. Was he tied to my emotions, just as I was to his?

“I wonder what I can do,” I said, mostly to myself.

I hopped off the patio, my feet hitting the soft grass beneath me. Kneeling down, I held my hand over a wilted dandelion, one that had probably drowned in weed killer. Tilting my head, I could feel the energy beneath me, above me, and flowing all around. I directed it into the little weed, closing my eyes. The energy swelled up, pushing out the darkness and purifying the plant. I cracked an eye and was shocked back to my ass.

The weed had grown six inches, vibrant and alive.

“Whoa,” I whispered, running my fingers over the thick veins in a dark green leaf. “Looks like I now have a green thumb.” I laughed at my own joke.

Edwin observed silently. I peered up at him before standing and retrieving my beer.

“What do you feel when you do that?” Edwin asked from behind me. I turned, leaning against the high porch and shrugging.

“Energy, I think.” I watched his closed-off expression as he stared down at the dandelion. “You wanna share what you are thinking?” I hedged.

“Your father?” He let the question hang out there.

I took a long sip, draining the bottle. “Not around.”

“He was human?” He pushed.

I shrugged. He nodded before looking back at the house. “Don’t bother, she won’t tell you anything,” I said to cut off the thought. “I’ve tried.”

Edwin’s eyes lit up amber. “Have you tried while using vampire glamour?”

My eyes widened, then narrowed severely. “No. Not even, don’t attempt it.”

His eyes stayed amber. “Release me,” he demanded.

I blinked, not sure if he was pulling my leg or what.

“Sure, let me just make the full moon appear out of nowhere.”

“Clap,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “Seriously.”

Edwin blinked, his eyes once again blue in white, and no fangs in sight. “You appear to have a natural immunity to glamour. I wonder if your mother does as well, or if that is a trait inherited from your father.”

“Edwin, you’re treading on a pretty delicate subject,” I warned.

He raised an eyebrow. “Because he didn’t want you, or because your mother won’t tell you anything about him?”

I clenched my jaw closed, blinking back the sting of tears. I moved to go inside, but thought better. If their shifter hearing hadn’t already alerted Ford, Randy and Lionel to my conversation with Edwin, certainly my elevated heart rate and salty unshed tear would raise questions.

So instead, I moved deeper into the unlit backyard. Edwin didn’t follow. I could feel him staying stationary at the back of the house. Tall oak trees lined the back of property, where I sat down in a worn twine-and-wood swing.

Edwin had hit a hot button. I should have known they would all be listening to my conversation with my mom upstairs. I groaned, pushing off the ground and launching the ancient swing into motion. It groaned in turn at the added weight of a twenty-something.

Lots of kids grow up without a father, some without a mother, and others still without either. I was lucky to have a mother who loved me, adored me, most of the time. So why, why was I still pining over a father I never knew?

The questions plagued me. Why set up a trust fund? Why no communication? Why didn’t my mother want to talk about him? Why no pictures of him? And the all-powerful question, why didn’t he want me?

I sighed, the twine rough against my palms. I stopped the swing, my head dropping low.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Ford asked, giving the swing a gentle push.

“Did you hear Edwin?” I asked softly.

“Pieces,” he said.

“My mom and me?” I asked, my voice inaudible to a human.

He stopped the swing, moving in front of me, legs butting my knees. I hesitated to look up at him, ready for the “It’s none of my business” speech.

“Look at me, Penni,” he demanded.

I did, reluctantly, and he continued. “You’re the fiercest woman I’ve ever met. You are loyal without thought for yourself and a vixen in the bedroom. I’d be a fool to ever let you go, just as your father is.”

I let go of a broken breath, smiling before I launched myself into his arms. His impressive shifter strength was all that saved us from going ass over tea kettle into the weeds.

Setting me down, he cupped my face in his strong hands. “I don’t know what the future is going to bring, or how we’ll manage while you are in school, but I’m in, one thousand percent, by your side.” He kissed me, his words warming my soul and his kiss warming farther south.

...

After the goodbyes, Ford and I decided to head back to his house. Edwin decided to stay with us. Whatever, I was his food source, I suppose. Insert eye roll here.

Ford and I spent the night expressing our, well at least my, tearful confessions of deeper emotions. I didn't give a shit if Edwin heard us.

Monday morning rolled around too early, and we all headed in to work together, but in two separate vehicles. I was going dress shopping with Becca for the full moon event, which was on a Thursday in Lionel's backyard. I wasn't sure it was a dress-up event, but when in doubt, look smokin'.

'Cause I didn't have enough riding on the full moon already, right? Sure, let's add an honorary-member-of-the-pack ceremony with formal attire to whatever the fuck was going to happen with Edwin and Jaelle.

Edwin was moping behind one of my spare pairs of sunglasses on the way to the shop, riding shotgun.

"Olie and Logan offered to keep you with them," I said to his funk.

He scoffed, "I rather like my head where it is, thank you."

I shrugged. "You know there is dress shopping after work?"

"I heard," he droned.

Dude was a party pooper. I was not looking forward to shopping with him.

A strange pull had me grasping my chest and slamming on the brakes, an inhale trapped in my lungs.

"What?" Edwin demanded, leaning over the center console and placing his hand lightly on my shoulder.

I shook my head, massaging my chest. "I don't know, it felt similar to the pull of the witch, but this was cold, really cold."

"Check on Jaelle," he ordered, hand snapping away. Which was really annoying. I didn't mind when Ford did it, but this asshole bossing me around? No.

I reached for my phone, but he stopped me with one icy hand. "Not that way."

I narrowed my eyes at him before pulling off the side of the road. Closing my eyes, I let my hands drop from the steering wheel into my lap. Jaelle's energy was quiet, latent, and as Edwin had correctly guessed, icy.

I hissed out a breath. "She's fine. Depressed, but not in any physical danger."

"Perhaps the witch is close," Edwin mused, turning his gaze outside the window.

My eyes snapped open at that statement. "I hope not," I shuttered.

Edwin nodded. "Waiting in a stopped vehicle won't do us any favors."

I huffed, slamming the car back into drive.

The day passed quickly. As we wrapped up work, I said my long, drawn-out goodbye to Ford, much to Edwin's annoyance.

Becca was practically bouncing as she waited by her car for dress shopping. I laughed, catching the joy she was radiating. "Excited much?"

"YES!" she squealed.

I laughed harder while we loaded up. “Here,” she said, shoving her phone at me, “navigate and look through my Pinterest board.”

I did both, forgetting that Edwin was a silent passenger in the backseat.

“Oh man, that sweetheart neckline would be amazing on you!” I exclaimed. I kept up a steady stream of commentary on her choices, while also directing her through traffic.

We had just exited the vehicle when Edwin announced. “I’m hungry.”

I groaned. “Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?” I hissed, moving outside the car. This must be how moms of toddlers feel, I realized. I flashed Becca a winning smile. “I’ll meet you inside.”

She nodded, toying with her keys, clearly at odds about whether she should leave me alone with the vampire.

“That bar sells blood,” Edwin enlightened me, pointing at a darkly decorated place named Ruby Red.

I surveyed the unoccupied tables outside, darkly tinted windows, and pristine, red carpet entrance.

“Will you behave?” I asked. I probably should have just commanded him to behave, but I was trying to make the next week and change less annoying for myself. On some level, I was certain my approach would come back to bite me.

“I always do,” he smiled, and I had to admit, it wasn’t an unattractive look on him.

I sighed, watching him walk off. “I hope so,” I muttered, before plastering on my best excited face for Becca.

Dress shopping sucked. After the initial excitement wore off, I got to the point where I didn’t care if we showed up in burlap sacks, as long as I could eat dinner and go home.

“I don’t know, Penni, what do you think of this one?”

I looked over the high-necked, throat choker of a dress.

“It doesn’t look comfortable,” I said, being honest.

The bell up front chimed and Edwin walked in.

“That dress is all wrong for your figure. It makes your already well-defined upper body appear manly.” And I thought I was being brutally honest.

“Why don’t you find something better?” Becca sounded off.

Edwin inclined his head, and I couldn’t believe it, but it looked like he was actually going to do as requested. “Hey, while you’re at it, can you find a dress for me, too?” I yelled, louder than necessary.

The salesperson helping us looked at me, uncomfortable. “Vampire?” she whispered. He did move off at impossible speed for a human.

“Yes, but don’t worry, he’s tethered to her. Can’t do anything she doesn’t tell him to,” Becca offered with a chuckle, although nothing she said was particularly funny.

The saleswoman nodded, not at all convinced.

“Here.” Edwin gave me a forest green dress and Becca a cream one.

“Let’s get y’all into those!” the saleswoman exclaimed with false excitement. At least, I assumed it was false. My own certainly was at that point. Heaving myself up from the chair, I took the fitting room next to Becca. I didn’t spare the dress much attention, stripping down before even really looking at it.

A minute later, I stepped out of the dressing room. “I like it. I’m impressed, Edwin,” I confessed as I stepped onto the raised platform in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors.

He nodded at his handiwork. “I was a tailor,” he admitted.

I stayed still, not turning around or making any sudden movements that might break the spell or the moment of honesty. It felt suspiciously like progress, I daresay.

“Wow!” Becca said, stepping out of the other dressing room. “That dress is amazing!”

I smiled. The delicate, off-the-shoulder straps helped keep my ample girls where they needed to be. The cinched waist highlighted my curves, and the high-low skirt gave me room to move, but still an alluring touch of modesty.

“Look at you!” I squealed, genuine excitement coming back.

Becca blushed, looking down at the mermaid-cut dress, crafted with pearl accents on the lace overlay. “It’s perfect and on sale! Nice job, Edwin!” She offered him a high five. I could be mistaken, but I thought he smiled, even while refusing to return the gesture.

“Does this mean we can finally eat?” I begged, offering a quick subject change.

Becca looked at herself in the mirror, grinning widely. “Yes, this is the one.”

...

I woke up in Ford’s bedroom sweating, the sheets around me soaked. I sat up, tossing off the damp covers, feeling my pillow and seeing it had suffered the same fate. My throat was burning and I made my way to the kitchen for water and Tylenol, assuming it was a fever.

After draining three glasses of water and the medicine, I went to sleep on the couch. No sense in waking up Ford to change the sheets if it wasn’t bothering him.

...

Voices were breaking through the sleep I’d managed to snag. The medicine had taken forever to help and I had tossed and turned, watching infomercials followed by reality TV until the fever finally abated.

Padding into the kitchen, I heaved myself down at the counter, resting my head on the cool surface.

“What happened last night?” Ford asked.

“Fever, I woke up sweating buckets,” I groaned into the counter.

He nodded, laying the back of his hand against my neck. “You feel fine now.”

I nodded, resting my head in my hand to look at his finely chiseled face. “Guess it was fast moving.”

“You should take it easy today, just hang out here.”

I nodded again, having zero desire to do anything.

He kissed my temple before heading out. “Keep an eye on her, vampire. If she goes, so do you.”

I huffed, going for the orange juice.

“Your boyfriend lacks tact,” Edwin critiqued from a corner I didn’t know he was hiding in.

I smiled at him over the rim of my juice. “I know.” It felt good to acknowledge Ford as what he was.

“So, what’s the plan?” Edwin asked.

“TV?” I shrugged. “Do you have somewhere you need to be?”

“Obviously not,” he snipped out.

“Do you need to check in with someone so they’re not worried about you?” I asked.

His gaze was heated and pointed. “Don’t think I’d supply you names of those I care about. This binding is going to be over soon, and I will be gone.”

I sat back. “Oh, yeah, sure.” With that, I went back to the couch, armed with a muffin Ford had made.

I struggled to get comfortable. The house pressed around me. I felt suffocated, no matter what program I tried to lose myself in. Not even the mind-numbing allure of social media could do it for me. I stretched, heading back into the kitchen. Not finding Edwin, I headed outside.

I moved almost unconsciously. Down the back patio steps to the dark, rich earth, where I sunk down, pushing my hands deep into the warm soil. The irritation instantly lifted, as did my hair when the breeze picked up. It snapped my blond locks around, forcing me to look down and close my eyes.

Words tumbled out of me. “Goddess, hear me, protect me. Guide me and strengthen my word to find the truth and protect the innocent.”

Like a clogged ear popping, everything came into crystal focus. No breeze, but I was bleeding into the earth. I must have torn my hand on a rock when I decided to come out here and dig. Why had I done that, anyways? And what had I said? Had I said something?

“Yes, she’s regaining awareness now,” Edwin said into my phone.

I turned to see him in the shade of the house.

“What’s going on?” I rasped out.

“Olivia’s father believes it is the magic taking root—air, earth, fire, water and spirit,” Edwin replied, hanging up the phone before pocketing it.

I nodded, pulling my dirt-covered hands onto my thighs. “I’m going to shower,” I muttered, shell shocked by the whole situation and deeply disturbed by the missing memories.

...

Showered and changed, I headed to the kitchen where Edwin was.

“Ford said you should eat and he will be home soon,” Edwin commanded.

I nodded, picking at the bacon he had made. It must say something that I wasn’t instantly irritated at his tone.

“Are you feeling well?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I’m not having any weird urges to run out and cut myself in the dirt again.”

Edwin nodded. “The Magician also said I’m not to feed from you anymore. Apparently by exchanging blood, we could make this arrangement permanent.”

“Oh shit,” I muttered, daring a glance at those blue eyes.

“Relax, you haven’t ingested my blood, so there’s no real worry.”

I nodded. “That’s good.”

I toyed with the bacon absentmindedly. “What?” Edwin asked, annoyed.

“I want to go back outside,” I confessed.

Edwin sighed and made a shooining motion.

I shrugged and headed for the door. If I was going to do something reckless, he would be there to assist, or videotape and humiliate me with it. The bandage I had applied to my hand after my shower itched and I flexed it, trying to get the sensation to ease.

The morning sun blasted me as I sat on the porch, blowing out a breath. I wondered if this was what it was like for Ford, to be an animal with primal needs in a society where we had cut ourselves off from nature.

Mind you, I’m not complaining about a roof or running water. I just felt ... awakened.

I spent most of the morning soaking up the sun, until my skin was hot and glowing. Becca texted me at one point. *So should we like bring anything to the full moon celebration?*

I tapped my phone. *Maybe? Probably couldn’t hurt. Sandwich spread maybe?*

Becca texted back instantly, *Yes, can you arrange it?*

I shrugged, for no one to see. *Yep.*

Edwin was nowhere to be seen when I finally dragged myself inside. Tapping into our connection, I found him down the street, probably eating. Just as well.

Ford came home for lunch. We ate and chatted before he went back to work. I saw the worry for me etched in his features, and I was determined to beat this, or perhaps master it.

Edwin returned as I was slipping my flip-flops on, getting ready to go to the local deli to place my massive order. I had zero concerns of food going to waste in this group. Plus, I had another errand weighing on my mind. An idea I had been toying with, cemented by Ford’s worried stare and strained smile from lunch.

“You have uncanny timing, and you need a phone or something,” I muttered to him, thinking a bell would do some good as well.

He shrugged. “That would require access to funds and an identity I don’t have,” he reminded me.

I nodded. “Burner phones don’t require ID ... but they do cost money, yeah, yeah. Wanna come to Lionel’s with me?” I asked.

“Why?” he demanded, brilliant blue eyes narrowing at the suggestion.

“I want to see if Olie is still there to help with what is happening,” I answered with a shrug.

“Why don’t you call?” he asked.

“Because if I just show up and they aren’t there, then I can peruse some books on the witchy subject, and claim innocence. If I ask in advance, well, then I can’t.”

Edwin nodded. "You'd make an excellent vampire."

I furrowed my eyebrows at him. "Yeah, I'm not big on the whole drinking blood thing."

Edwin stepped closer, crisp blond curls dangling against his shockingly blue eyes. "Trust me, I can change that."

"Umm, no," I said, pushing him back and going to my car.

We drove and exited the car in silence, Edwin's discomfort growing as we stood on the porch waiting for an answer.

Lionel jerked the door open. "What?" he groaned. Apparently, keeping the Alpha in the house was not agreeing with him.

"Where the hell is that damn wolf?" I heard, laughing at Olie's comment.

"Can I borrow Olie?" I asked.

"Please, please take her!" Lionel begged.

"I can hear you!" the woman in question yelled.

She popped out from the kitchen, unfazed. "What's up, buttercup?"

"I was wondering if I could work through some basic witchery with you? Did you hear what happened?" I asked, rubbing the bandaged cut on my hand.

Olie nodded, taking the last bite of the cookie in her hand before shrugging. "Sure, why not. I think we're flying out soon, anyways."

"Really?" I squeaked.

"Yeah," she said, punctuating the word with malice, "we have our own issues to deal with, although leaving before the witch has been exterminated does not sit well with either of us."

I nodded; made sense, they did run a great big territory.

She huffed and grabbed her black jacket before stepping down the front porch, leading the way out back. I almost commented on wearing leather in the heat, but I knew better.

"Hey, vampy," Olie greeted Edwin, her mood bounding back, "enjoying your time with us?"

"I've never been so thoroughly entertained," Edwin drawled.

Olie stepped away from the house. "Okay, first rule of magic is, there are no rules."

"Really?" I questioned.

She shrugged. "I tend to blend, mix and match. I find intent to be the most potent ingredient."

I nodded. "How do you access it?"

Olie tilted her head to the side, looking up at the sky. "It's always been cords for me, tightly woven bands or thin threads."

"You just close your eyes and see it?" I asked, already feeling doubtful about my skills.

"Yes, but you have to understand, I've been able to access a part of my magic all my life, which is a long-ass story. Let's try this, try focusing on something you know has power," she suggested.

Sucking in my top lip, I nodded. Kneeling down, I laid my hands, one still bandaged, on the ground. Hell, it had worked once.

“See the magic,” Olie instructed.

I did. Just as she had described, coils of power were lying dormant, intertwining with the trees in the distance, the house that was built upon the soil.

“Got it?” Olie asked.

I nodded.

“Pull it,” she commanded.

Blowing out a breath, I did as instructed. A pinch on my hand concerned me for only a moment before I brushed it away, assuming it was my self-inflicted cut being stretched. Trusting what Olie said, I pulled hard on the cords. The earth shifted under my feet, or at least that’s what it felt like. Tipping over, I could feel the threads nestled between my fingers, heavy with potent power.

“Ssshiiiiit,” Olie said. “Open your eyes.”

I did, panting as I looked up at her, then down to my hand grasping the threads. It wasn’t just invisible power, it was actual earth that had shifted up at my pulling. A steady drip of blood seeped from my bandaged hand.

“Your magic is blood-called,” Olie mused, looking at the lump of dirt I had discharged. “Cool.”

“Is that normal?” I questioned softly as I cautiously stood up.

Olie shrugged. “I’ve never seen it, but I’m pretty new as an official member of the magic community. Shit. Let me grab Jaelle.” With that, she headed into the house, leaving me still holding strands.

“Should I let go?” I asked of Edwin.

“Is it taxing?” he requested.

I tilted my head, considering the question. “It feels heavy,” I finally settled on.

Edwin shrugged. “I see no reason you couldn’t do the exercise again, in reverse.”

Exhaling, I opened my hand and felt the earth snap back to where it should be. I stumbled slightly; apparently, I hadn’t realized how much energy I’d been exerting.

“That is interesting,” Jaelle said from behind.

I turned, seeing her and Olie together.

“Can you call a circle?” Jaelle asked.

“Like of dirt?” I asked.

Jaelle nodded. Remembering that I knew nothing, she added, “Circles of power are circles of protection. As a blood mage, you may have to draw the circle in blood.”

“Mage?” Olie questioned.

Jaelle nodded. “Blood magic belongs to mages. Which makes sense, once we consider how a witch becomes a mage.”

Olie nodded, “Right.”

“And that is?” Edwin demanded.

Jelle gave him a long, cold stare. “I have the same question,” I added, once again fighting the urge to raise my hand.

“Of course,” she relented, inclining her head to me. “A witch can progress into a mage by consuming the power of another. There is some debate about whether taking the power of a witch versus a mage is the defining factor in the progression. But in your case, as a human, you bypassed witch and went directly to mage, apparently due to the witch’s augmented magic.”

“So that means...” I asked.

Jelle didn’t flinch at my lack of knowledge. “Witches are on the lower level of the power scale, so their magic has to be tied to ceremonies, blood, herbs, candles, and the power of a coven. A mage doesn’t need any of that to be potent. You’re a walking powerhouse, Penni.”

“Well, fuck,” I whispered, blinking a few times. Okay, not a witch. I’m not a witch ... I’m a fucking mage? But a human mage? “So, a circle?” I asked, needing to redirect my attention.

“Yes, let’s begin,” Jelle instructed.

“Try pulling the element’s power from your feet; imagine the current of the earth flowing within you,” she counseled.

Having no real idea how to do what she described, I closed my eyes and filled my lungs, slowly releasing the air. On my next breath, I sought out the elemental energy. Sending my awareness into the earth around me, I pulled. My body shuddered, my head tipping back, the tingling ripping up my spine and cresting in my forehead.

“Excellent,” Jelle complimented me, “now send it down your arm and walk in a circle.”

She was an excellent teacher, patient and articulate.

For a moment I could only breathe, only feel the shiver of power and thrum of magic within. Slowly, I pulled myself from its song inside of me. Opening my eyes and forcing my feet to move, I gave the magic direction and purpose, closing the small circle before turning to Jelle.

She nodded. “That’s it. You are a quick study,” she smiled.

I smiled back at her. The magic was intoxicating. I was beginning to understand how badly the witch must want it back, and why witches would rip it away from others.

Aside from the circle, she taught me how to recognize the elements’ power, which I could pull unlimitedly, and the power of others, which was usually safely guarded and harder to get a hold of. Except in the case of the witch I had jacked, apparently.

Olie was more than willing to be target practice, not that anything I tossed at her did much. I did convince a vine to twine around her booted foot. She snarled at it and it withered away.

“Well, shit,” I muttered, feeling defeated.

“Don’t feel too badly,” Logan said with a laugh, chewing on an apple and coming to stand next to her. Olie couldn’t help but smile at him, joy, love and warmth written into the intimate gesture. “Even powerhouse witches can’t match Olivia. She’s basically thermonuclear.”

“So you should rejoice that you got that vine to even come near me,” Olie said, before making a face at the apple Logan was now offering her.

“Tommy is on the phone for you,” Logan said, giving her a gentle push to the house.

“Please tell me this isn’t about that damn concert again,” she complained.

“I could, but I’d be lying. He has come up with a very creative compromise.” Logan chuckled, his eyes following her long stride before he did the same.

Alone with Jaelle and Edwin, I absently rubbed my chest.

“What is it?” Jaelle asked.

I jerked my attention to her before shrugging. “I don’t know, a pulling maybe? Not uncomfortable like before, it’s just a little draining.”

Jaelle nodded. “It must be daunting to be thrust into this situation. Boyfriend is a wolf, you with new magic powers, the heads of the shifters and Council suddenly having dinner at your house.”

I sighed, letting my vision shift to the magic sight she had just taught me. Looking down, I saw the purple-hued cords wrapping around my heart, one extending to Edwin and the other to Jaelle.

While that scared the shit out of me, I cleared my throat. “Ya know, I always knew I was destined for greatness. Guess I was just too badass to remain human.”

I don’t think she bought the line or the winning smile I attached to it.

“We should get back,” I said to Edwin. “I have another errand to run.”

He nodded and we said our goodbyes.

...

While my mind was tempted to revisit the cords extending from my chest, I forced it into party planning instead. Yes, we were bound, but it would go away.

I picked up the catering menu for the local deli and also the grocery store deli, ‘cause I like saving money. Waltzing into Becca’s shop, I catcalled Ford, who was bent over a car.

He slammed his head into the hood before realizing it was me.

“Lovely,” Edwin stated in disgust. “I’m going to eat.”

“Hey, beautiful,” Ford greeted me, dropping a kiss against my lips.

“Hey yourself, hot stuff.” I grinned hopelessly up at him.

“Whatcha got?” he asked, plucking the deli menus from my hand.

I let him have them. “Becca and I are bringing snacks as a thank you for pack protection.”

Ford nodded, taking a moment to look over both menus. “Do you have a preference?” I asked, his silence making me wonder if this was in fact a horrid idea.

“Nope, but the local joint does sound delicious. I want to try their pesto now,” he grinned, handing the menus back and waggling his eyebrows.

I slapped him with said menus. “I don’t know how you just made pesto dirty, but you did.”

He laughed, moving back to the vehicle currently under his care as I headed on to Becca's office.

"Piece of fucking shit!" Becca yelled at the printer.

"Do NOT hit it!" I yelled, throwing myself between her and the machine, arms spread wide.

"It's a piece of shit!" she hollered at me.

"That you don't need to replace right now! Just let me handle it," I implored her.

"Fine," she clipped, "this needs to be printed and mailed out." She made a circular motion in the general direction of the computer.

"Lovely, now do you want to talk about deli choices?" She slammed the office door on her way out. Oookaaaay, guess not.

...

After a few hours in front of the computer, I pushed back from the desk, rubbing my temples, the throbbing I had been ignoring now affecting my stomach as well.

With a groan, I forced my feet under me. Dragging myself out the office door, I all but fell into Ford's arms.

"You alright?" he questioned, holding me at arm's length.

"How did you get in here?" I groaned. "Uh, yeah ... no ... maybe. I practiced magic with Jaelle and Olie. I think it took more out of me than I realized."

He nodded, slipping a hand into my back pocket. "Let's have Edwin drive your car home."

I nodded, too tired to fight.

Becca waved goodbye as we all headed out together, staying just long enough to be sure she got into her car safely.

Edwin took off with tires squealing and I groaned as the car disappeared, hoping he wouldn't wreck it. How was I going to explain that one to my insurance company? So yeah, I let a vampire drive my car because I had a magical connection to him? I was pretty sure my policy didn't cover that.

Ford eased the truck into motion as he massaged my neck. I groaned in appreciation.

"So, magic practice?" he asked.

I chuckled. "It wasn't anything impressive. Jaelle showed me how to cast a circle, and do this neat second sight thing." My voice caught, and clearing my throat didn't deceive Ford.

"What?" he demanded, dropping his hand from my neck.

I turned to him. "When I used my new sight to look at the three of us—me, Edwin and Jaelle—I could see the cords that bind us, wrapped around my heart."

"Is that bad?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It felt bad. I suppose I could ask. Maybe it's not."

Ford nodded, swinging by Domo's Diner for a dinner we both desperately needed.

Chapter 12

The evening passed peacefully. I showered and fell into bed early.

Sometime later, I woke up gasping for breath, clutching my chest.

“Edwin,” I rasped.

“What’s wrong?” Ford asked me sleepily.

“It’s Edwin, there’s something wrong with him.” I was out of bed, tossing clothing on before bolting for the back door.

Ford was hot on my heels, preferring to remain naked.

It felt like a beacon in my chest, drawing me forward. Over the porch, past the dirt I had dug my hands into, deeper into the dense forest Ford was so fond of.

“Penni, what’s going on? We may be headed into an ambush,” Ford whispered worriedly, while staying at my side.

I looked toward Ford without hearing or seeing him. He gently shook me and repeated the warning.

I rattled my head clear and then nodded. “I command you to show me what you see, Edwin,” I said firmly.

My sight was overtaken immediately. The purple robe wearer was looking a little weary as she paced in front of a tied-up Edwin. *How does a known witch manage to snag a vampire not once but twice?* I asked myself angrily.

“Look for details,” Ford demanded.

I nodded, sinking deeper into Edwin’s sight. She had slit his wrist and he was slowly bleeding out as he knelt in the dirt. *Bitch, he was MINE!* My body leaned forward, almost successfully overriding the “stay” command I was issuing to it with grinding teeth.

“She’s got two males with her ... knives, no guns that I can see. It’s a trap for sure,” I told Ford as I backed out of Edwin’s sight.

Ford nodded, sniffing the air. “I’m going to shift. You focus on getting Edwin out of there and both of you gone. Leave the others to me.” He snarled and all my lady bits clenched and slathered at the sound. Ford smiled. “Later, princess,” he said, the shift overcoming him.

I nodded, blowing out a breath before moving again, slowly and cautiously, toward Edwin. I pulled elements to me, having no idea what to do with them, but feeling better having something I could throw around.

I felt the air charging and swirling around us, changing in its intent. Holding out a hand to Ford, I slipped into my new second sight, seeing the spells in front of us.

Tilting my head at the magic, I admitted to myself that I had no idea what the fuck it did. But from the roaring red, I knew water would nullify it. Having none on me, I pulled from the dew on the ground and humidity in the air, letting it seep into the red-corded magic until it disappeared.

I nodded to Ford and we continued on. We didn't encounter another spell, and the camp was poorly hidden. The fire gave it away when we were still far off. Perhaps the thing I'd disabled was a warning or masking spell?

It didn't matter. They weren't going to get any additional warnings after taking what was mine. Two witches and one wannabe. I was pretty damn confident in our abilities to take them out.

Ford nipped at my hand, pulling me back before I could go roaring in, magic blazing. He shook his head and pointed with his snout toward Edwin. The witches were mulling over something on a laptop, their backs to Edwin. And us.

"Free him first?" I whispered. Ford nodded and I followed him—not nearly as silently, but I managed not to alert the three assholes in question. Using his wickedly sharp claws, Ford sliced through the bonds on Edwin's feet. Edwin's eyes fluttered once, a long-drawn sigh parting his lips. Nothing else.

Pressing my lips in a thin line, I rubbed the wrist he had taken from earlier. It was a dumb thought. He was a vampire. He hadn't particularly invested in my health, why should I care about his? But watching his death-like stillness tore at my fucking heart. I couldn't watch him die.

...

Ford watched Penni's internal struggle. She could let Edwin die, right here and now. Be done with it, done with the binding. Ford wouldn't blame her if she did. Still, he wasn't surprised at all when she offered Edwin her wrist, her face etched in pain, brows drawn, eyes misty.

He did look away before Edwin's fangs broke through her skin.

...

I shoved my wrist in front of Edwin, feeling his eerily cold lips brush against the sensitive skin. Terror stilled my movements and drained my warmth for a moment before his fangs clamped painfully down. I bit back a scream, arching into myself. It hadn't hurt nearly as much the last time.

A low growl from Ford had me turning to him, watching as he stalked silently toward the hunched figures. Edwin released my wrist and I landed on my ass. I could see Ford scenting the copper of our blood, rage sweeping over him.

Ford abandoned his stealth, the surprise attack gone now. Loudly and without the usual grace I had come to associate with him, he launched at one of the men.

The blond robe wearer turned around, shock playing across her delicate features before anger snarled her brow and gave her premature wrinkles.

"You filthy piece of human trash," she snarled at me. "I don't know how you managed to get my power, but I will have it back, even if I have to consume your heart to do so." She stepped closer, her jaw clenching hard. Time to get off the ground.

"That doesn't sound sanitary. I'm honestly shocked to see your sorry ass still here." Yeah, I was totally taunting her, or maybe just buying time to get my own ass up.

With a snarl of desperation, she flung herself at me. I didn't see the blade until the last second, throwing up my arms to guard against getting shanked in the middle of the damn woods. My sweater tore as she managed to cut my forearm deeply before I pushed her back. Bitch was strong.

Pain seared my wrist. She looked at her knife gleefully before carefully gathering a few drops of my blood into a white cloth. Holding my bleeding wrist tightly, she took a glance at the other two witches, now pinned under Edwin and Ford, before fleeing into the woods.

I moved a few steps to follow before Edwin stopped me.

“Leave it,” he commanded, snapping the neck of the male witch in his arms.

“She has my blood,” I rasped. “That can’t be good.”

Edwin shook his head, looking from where the ringleader had vanished to the bloody jaws of Ford.

“We have to get you stitched up. I can’t give you my blood to heal the wound or we risk this bond becoming permanent since you just gave me your blood again,” Edwin drawled, as though I wasn’t bleeding out in the damn backwoods.

I gritted my teeth, keeping pressure on my wound and reluctantly accepting his help.

...

Olie paced the floor as I drank my weight in booze and Ford stitched me up.

“Why do I always have to miss all the good shit? And yes, her having your blood is not a good thing.”

I groaned at Olie’s announcement.

Jaelle helpfully filled me in. “The list of things she could do is extensive. But since you’re a human without magic of your own, I don’t know if the spells will work in the traditional ways on you.”

“She’s still working with her coven,” Edwin reminded them.

“How many are even still alive?” Logan asked.

We all shrugged. Well, not me. I drank more.

“How did she get you again, Edwin?” I asked, okay, maybe slurred. An annoying part of me suggested I should probably slow down on the consumption now that Ford was done stitching.

Edwin let out a long sigh, not looking at me.

“I do believe Penni asked you a question,” Logan rumbled.

Ford growled low, stepping closer to Edwin. A quick shower had washed away the evidence he’d destroyed a witch with his shifter teeth. Was it bad that it didn’t bother me at all? Well, as long as he had brushed his teeth. I swallowed another swig of vodka, enjoying the burn.

I sighed, resting my head heavily in my hands. “Edwin, I command you to tell the truth of how you were captured.” I raised my head to meet his pissed-off gaze. “And please know it fucking sucks I even have to.”

Edwin’s jaw ground as his eyes ambered. He might have hated me, but he had forced this moment.

“It’s worse if you fight it, Edwin, you know this,” Jaelle counseled softly. It was crowded at Ford’s. I was just glad Lionel had opted not to hang out. He had taken a few wolves to prowl the area, while Ford kept him mentally updated through the pack connection.

“She said she could free me from you,” Edwin finally spat out. If he’d been human, I think the effort of speaking those words would have left him breathless. As it was, he just continued to stare at me.

I shouldn’t say anything, I knew, I should just let it ride.

“How did she contact you?” Ford demanded, wrapping up my forearm.

Edwin pressed his lips together tightly. "I command you, fucker," I hissed at him, "since apparently having to hang with me is so goddamn awful that you'd rather go back to the bitch who put you in this situation!" I was yelling now. And swaying in my seat.

Shock flitted across Edwin's expression. I blurred it out by drinking again.

"We are totally going to be besties," Olie grinned. I swear nothing fazed her, ever. Here I was, drinking buckets and bleeding, and she wasn't even mildly concerned.

"Answer the question," Olie said to Edwin, deceptively quietly, "or I'll let the shifter put hands on you." Her crazy smile was a fucking beauty. I was insanely jealous.

Edwin snarled and Ford tensed, ready to make good on Olie's threat.

Olie shrugged. "Go for it, Ford," she said, as easily as if she were commenting on the weather.

Ford struck fast and hard, claws sprouting and slicing through Edwin's face. I gulped as I watched the wound ooze bright red blood, before Edwin's super healing left no trace of it.

"You sought her out," I whispered, rubbing my forehead. "Knew where she'd hide out, knew she'd be desperate for help getting her power back." A groan vibrated through me.

The images flashed through my mind. With a small cry, I cradled my head in my hands, not noticing that the room had gone eerily silent and my bottle had slipped to the ground.

"Two weeks! Less than two weeks, and you would have never had to see me again," I whispered, staring at the cream carpeting I was sitting on. "Two weeks with me was so awful that you'd rather go back to that bitch. You'd rather have her string me up and rip me apart than wait." I lifted my head up and met his blue gaze.

"You deserve her," I forged on, "you deserve the double cross. I command you to stay away from me, do not speak to me. Go with Olie and Logan. Clearly, you don't want to be here anymore." I hissed the last words with all the disgust I could muster in my drunk, injured state.

I stood up unsteadily, and thankfully Ford picked up the slack, throwing an "I'll be right back" over his shoulder before carrying me up to the bedroom.

I cried, sniffing as the salty tears tracked down my face, "Am I that horrible?" I whispered to him as he set me on the bed.

"Shh, no baby, no. He's a vampire, deceit is hardwired into him." I nodded against his chest, believing it.

Ford stripped me down and pulled a clean shirt of his over my head. I nestled into the covers, careful of my new battle scar, obtained by trying to save a backstabbing asshole. Ugh. The betrayal hurt, probably way worse than it should have since I was drunk.

...

"She's asleep," Ford said to the group.

Logan nodded while Olie examined Ford's knife block, an act that had concern flashing through Ford's mind. "Please tell me you are looking for food."

"Relax, turbo, I have excellent cleaning crews," she muttered, unconcerned.

Ford groaned.

“Was Penni correct about how you found the witch?” Logan asked, barrel arms crossed over his barrel chest as he stared down at Edwin.

“Yes,” Edwin answered, not looking up.

“Hmm,” Jaelle said, looking off to where Ford had taken Penni.

“What does that mean?” Ford asked.

“Penni’s more powerful than we believed. We should train her drunk next time,” Jaelle mused.

Olie shrugged, “I’m always good for drinking.”

“Where did you find the witches?” Ford demanded, a growl riding his voice.

Olie and Jaelle turned to him. “Thinking of making a house call?” Olie asked excitedly.

“I doubt they are still there,” Ford admitted, looking upstairs toward Penni.

“She needs you here,” Olie said. “She won’t admit it, but she’ll be upset if you aren’t here when she wakes up with a roaring headache.”

“But she’d understand why,” Logan countered.

Olie narrowed her gaze, silent communication zinging back and forth between them. Olie sighed, “Whatever.” Ford thought that meant Logan had won, but he was never sure with those two.

“So, Edwin,” Ford began, shifting his hands into claws, “where’s the pain-in-the-ass witch hiding at?”

...

Logan and Ford headed out to an abandoned mining camp on the north side of town. They had opted to take Edwin along. If he was lying, he wasn’t going to be leaving there alive.

Closing the driver’s door almost without a sound, Logan cracked his neck as he circled the black SUV that seemed to be the favorite vehicle of the Council.

“I don’t hear anything,” he commented.

“They’re probably not here, if they’re smart,” Edwin said for the hundredth time. Apparently, he really wanted to live, so much so he was already giving the two shifters reasons why there would be no one at the camp.

“But there should be evidence of them,” Ford countered, inhaling deeply.

“Not if they used magic to cover it up,” Edwin smugly reminded him.

“Possibly true, but the leader has been stripped of her magic, and her followers have been easy pickings. It would be more likely that they cut and ran without a masking spell,” Logan said, still surveying the area.

“If they were smart,” Ford growled.

Logan grunted an affirmative.

“I’ll shift, it’ll be easier to track them,” Ford offered.

Logan nodded. “Stay close, Edwin, I’d hate for the witches to get ahold of you again.” The deep rumble in his voice spoke of how amusing the lion shifter felt he was.

Edwin said nothing, glowering in his hunched-shoulder pose.

Tossing his clothing into the passenger side of the SUV, Ford took one last look around at the desolate expanse of soil before shifting.

Moving around the SUV, Ford's wolf sniffed deeply before blowing the breath out in favor of short inhales that might reveal some sign of magic or inhabitants. He found it in a trail that led toward a cabin, set back from the main road and overlooking the camp.

Ford chuffed and Logan nodded, following him. Ford assumed Edwin was following behind, based on the soft footfalls he counted. Returning his focus to where he was going, he saw that this cabin was larger than the rest. A picture window offered a view of the entire area. The cabin must have belonged to the mine owner or foreman, someone who needed to see it all in a glance. No shadows moved in the darkened structure, no scents overpowered Ford or alerted him. Nor did he hear any breathing or heartbeats.

But there wasn't a lack of anything, either, like he had experienced with the magic that hid the circle in the woods. He was inclined to agree with Logan, the witches had tucked tail and ran.

Ford waited by the wooden door until Logan pushed it open, moving into the space before him. Alphas.

It took only a few moments to verify what Ford had sensed. No one was home.

Logan rummaged through what little had been left behind before picking up a leather-bound book in the kitchen.

"Bingo," he muttered, turning pages. "Son of a bitch."

Ford cocked his head, eager to know what was going on.

Logan nodded to himself and Ford huffed.

"Let's get this back to Olie. I want to get her take on it."

...

"Son of a bitch," Olie echoed her mate, flipping a page in the journal of Belladonna. Finally, we had a name for the witch I had hijacked. I had come downstairs after hearing the voices, having slept off most of the drunkenness and wanting to know what was going on. I sat with Ford, Logan and Jaelle on the porch as Olie read the book.

"What?" I demanded impatiently.

Olie looked off into the distance before resting her gaze on me. "You didn't jack a witch, you jacked a magician."

"What the fuck does that mean?" I demanded in a freaked out whine. I had already been upgraded from witch to mage; I didn't like this new development.

Jaelle read over Olie's shoulder, nodding. "It means that Belladonna is a witch, but she consumed the power of a magician, which is hard to believe since I thought they were extinct. But back to the point. What you took from her was the magician's magic or energy, not her witch energy."

"So she's still a witch?" I asked. "And I'm not a mage, like we thought?"

"Yes," Olie said, "and right, you're not, you're a damn magician. I better call Dad, he's a full-blooded magician. At least I think he is."

"Yes, Olie," a giant minotaur answered on the third time she tried the call.

“Put him on, Doyle, it’s important,” Olie demanded.

The minotaur sighed. “He’s with your mother.”

“Don’t give a flying fuck. Put him on, and if he wants privacy, he can pay his own bills.” Well damn, talk about a complex family relationship. It was starting to make mine seem downright normal.

The minotaur huffed, clouding the screen with steam.

After plenty of pounding, yelling, and Olie cursing everyone out, The Magician—the only one known to exist, I now knew—graced the screen with his disheveled presence, salt and pepper hair tousled.

“Olivia, what could you possibly need?” he demanded.

She rapid-fired the problem to him, her face tight and closed down. “And the Succubus Queen had better not be in my fucking house!” she ended. Succubus Queen, what the fuck?

“Impossible,” The Magician said. “Does the journal say where or whom she took from? I haven’t been able to track down a single one from our ranks.” He muttered the last sentence.

“No.” Olie’s answer wasn’t what he wanted, and his frown deepened. His gaze went unfocused for a moment before he turned his attention back to his daughter.

“What can you tell me about Penni?” he asked.

“She’s human, as far as I can tell. Her mother certainly is,” Olie offered.

“Father?” he asked.

I shrugged, “Unknown.”

The Magician sighed. “What the witch did would be a huge leap from her current power and a difficult thing to accomplish. Penni, as a human, will have to tread lightly if she is able to access all the magic of a magician. It may kill her.”

“Right,” Olie said. Turning her attention to me, she elaborated, “Witches are diluted from the Fae. Their physical makeup would allow for that type of magic and power. Mages are witches who stole extra power.” Turning back to her father, she asked, “How are magicians made?”

Her dad’s mouth thinned. “Only a few are born. Most are mages who continue consuming the power of others to grow their magic until they reach the level of magician. It is not an easy thing to do.”

“Stellar,” I groaned, hiding my head in my arms. Ford rubbed my back reassuringly.

“Has this ever happened before?” Ford asked.

“Not that I know of,” Olie muttered, looking to The Magician.

“Not during my time, to my knowledge,” The Magician answered.

“There was that blood mage we heard of, the one the Fae took,” a female voice muttered.

“Oh, you need to be fucking kidding!” Olie screamed at the phone. “You know what, you get her pregnant again, and I’m castrating you both!”

We all looked at Olie, horrified. “I’m not fucking kidding,” she hissed. “Stop fucking and figure out who that mage was!” With that, she ended the call.

With a heavy sigh, she turned to Logan. “I’m not sure if leaving her alive was a smart decision.”

Logan shrugged, "He loves her."

"She's insane," Olie countered.

"Your father said the red world made her that way," Logan delicately offered, not making eye contact with her.

Olie opened her mouth to retaliate, but shook her head. "You know what? That's an entirely different conversation for an entirely different time." She rubbed the back of her neck and I watched her closely as she leafed through the journal. "In theory, if a blood mage was taken by the Fae," Olie began, more to herself than anyone else, "he or she could have consumed Fae magic to become a magician."

"That would logically make sense," Jaelle offered.

"Belladonna's going to try for her power again," I said softly.

Olie exhaled, meeting my gaze with her steel, sea green one. "Until you kill the bitch, she's going to keep coming after you."

I nodded, mulling that over.

"She won't get to you, Penni," Ford said, turning my chair to face him as he knelt in front of me. "I won't let her."

I nodded tearfully, wondering how I could return to school or a normal life while Belladonna was out there.

...

I woke up to Ford watching me. Cracking an eyelid, I took in his worried gaze.

"What's wrong?" I asked, reaching over to him.

"I'm trying to figure out how to find the witch," he admitted on a long exhale.

Sitting up, I wrapped my arms around his waist, resting my head on his shoulder. "She'll show back up. We've bested her each time."

Ford grunted in the affirmative, or negative, I wasn't sure. "We've found her. We haven't been successful in taking care of her so far," he unhelpfully reminded me.

I slipped around to face him, legs wrapped around his waist.

"Ford," I whispered his name, tipping his chin to look at me. "I trust you. I trust we can handle this together." His eyes dipped to my lips. "And I can think of far better things to do than worry."

He smiled and kissed me, slow and sweet. I started grinding my body against him, knowing the pleasure he could deliver and not being a patient person. His hands slipped back to the base of my skull, demanding control of the kiss. I gave it to him.

I let him tilt my face as he demanded, and so much more. I poured my soul into branding myself on him, his body and his lips, letting him have all of me, even the broken pieces I never let see the light of day. He met me, bit by bit, piece by piece, until we were tangled to our cores and I never wanted the pieces to fall apart again.

Chapter 13

The rest of the week passed in a blur of helping Becca out with the shop and trying to help Lionel comb through various witches' texts to find a way to track the damn bitch. We all wanted her out of the picture before the full moon event. Not that she'd be foolish enough to attack then. I had seen the guest list, and there were a lot of powerful motherfuckers attending.

...

I took another sip of bitter coffee, hoping it would help bring clarity to a day I felt ambivalent about.

The evening would bring the full moon celebration. Becca and I would be made friends of the pack, and the damn bonds around my heart would finally fall away. Chewing my bottom lip, I stared unseeingly at Ford's kitchen. Lionel had invited my mom to the festivities.

Yeah, let that one sink in for a minute. My mom might be seeing my boyfriend naked, and she sure as hell was going to see other shifters, doing, well shifting. Yeah. I had some concerns.

Ford's footsteps were soft on the stairs, but I still picked up on them.

"Hey baby," he whispered before pressing a nuzzling kiss against my cheek.

I smiled at his tousled bed head, low-slung gray sweatpants, and navy blue t-shirt closely hugging those perfectly chiseled abs, a dreamy sigh on my lips.

"You're sure about this?" I asked, without thinking through the question. As his uncertain glance shifted between filling his coffee mug and me, I instantly regretted it.

"Sure about what, Penni?" he asked, standing on the other side of the island, setting his coffee down untouched.

I squirmed in my seat. "Making me an honorary member of the pack, or friend of the pack," I clarified, holding my coffee close, watching him intently.

He rested his forearms on the tiled island between us. "Penni, you good?" he asked.

I nodded. "My mom might see you naked," I blurted out.

Ford laughed, standing up and taking a swig of his coffee. "I'll do my best not to flash your mom the goods."

...

I picked Becca up to run to the party store for plates, cups, napkins, etc. before heading over to the local deli to get our order.

As we sat at a table waiting for the massive order, I found myself asking her the same question I'd asked Ford.

"You sure about this?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Yeah, pack status? Totally in!" But her face fell as she went on, "Although Randy asked about me changing—you know, turning—and while there are some very attractive benefits, I'm not sure that's a commitment I'm ready for."

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s always nice to have the option, though,” I offered, not at all helpful.

Becca cleared her throat. “You alright?”

I didn’t bother with a fake smile. “Yep.” Tapping my fingers against the table, I added, “All good.” I honestly wasn’t sure if it was a lie. Being an honorary member of the pack didn’t have a down side. So why was I so leery of it?

...

Sporting our possibly too-much-for-the-occasion dresses, Becca and I finished setting out the last of the food on the expansive tables Lionel and Ford had brought out.

“I really hope we have enough,” I muttered.

Becca shrugged, adjusting her gorgeous dress. “Do you think we—”

“No, I think this is a big moment and it deserves a beautiful dress,” I told her, smiling.

Becca nodded and ran, I was guessing, sweaty palms over her fine fabric. The awkward silence needed an interruption, and a walking one was coming up behind us.

“Darlings, you look lovely,” my mother gushed. “Becca, that dress on you is simply stunning, and Penni, the cut of yours is breathtaking.”

As my mother took Becca’s hands and carried on without pausing for a breath, my gaze sought out Edwin, currently pouting in the shadows of the tree line. Olie and Logan had dropped him off when they had to jet off to their latest emergency. My left hand strayed to my chest and I felt the bond that tied us together. I pulled up my second sight, the cords looking the same as before.

Just a few more hours and I’d be rid of him forever. So why was I sad it was ending? What was wrong with me?

Ford found me in my reverie, still standing in front of the food table after my mom and Becca had wandered off. With an easy laugh, he maneuvered me out of the way of the hungry line forming around me.

I smiled up at him as we walked farther from the crowd.

“You know we are walking away from the food, right? The local deli with the pesto you wanted to try?” I asked him with my brow at full furrow.

Ford smiled, pulling me flush against him before kissing me, slowly, deeply, until I was seriously thinking of running into the forest with him, his packmates’ superior hearing be damned.

He ended the kiss with a disgruntled groan from me.

He smiled before he said his next words. “Things are far different than I expected with you, perhaps because I never expected anything. I could see this for us.” He surveyed the gathering before meeting my gaze again. My feet had stopped moving, my heart choking my throat. “I could see us being pack together.”

“But I’m human, I’d age like a human,” I whispered, reality finally dawning on me.

Ford nodded. “Unless we changed that. I want several lifetimes with you, Penelope, not just one.”

Holy crap, it didn't even bother me that he called me that. I might have even *liked* it. Shit was I gone. I smiled at him, a small, my-heart-belongs-to-you kind of smile. "I love you, Ford. Please just let me get through school, and we can revisit this conversation."

He brooded down at my blue eyes. "It's not a 'no,' or a 'never,' Ford," I explained. "It's a 'let me get my life together first.' I'm not Becca. I don't have my career secured, I'm still working on that. And as much as I care about you, I need to have my own life together."

He sighed, moving us back to the gathering. It wasn't the answer he wanted, but it was the truth. Um, hey, he hadn't said it back. You know, *it*. My brow furrowed. Did I bring that detail up? I mean, he had just said he wanted to turn me furry. So he didn't have to say it. Right? No, he did, actually.

Ford stilled in my arms; actually, everyone stopped moving, in an exceptionally eerie display of synchronicity. I looked around, catching my mother's eye and the confusion growing there.

Lionel's voice rang out, clear and authoritative, "Pack to me."

"Go get Becca and your mother, I'll shift and come to you," Ford growled, his eyes already beginning the shift. Swallowing down my fear, I nodded, walking a few steps before chucking my heels and running the distance to grab my mother's arm and do the same to Becca. Now what?

Snarls ripped the air and I paused, my mother wrapping herself around my right arm as I scanned the surrounding woods. They had previously seemed rustic and romantic, but now branches moved and swayed unnaturally, snapping. I was riveted as I watched the snarling wolf pack burst forth, wolves that didn't belong here. A cord tugging behind me had me turning around to watch Belladonna's smug mug walking toward us, an easy smile on her lips.

"I see you've met my pets," she taunted. Her wolves didn't seem to mind being called pets, which struck me as odd. "They've been instilled with my powers." She laughed confidently, chilling my blood. "Say goodbye to your friends!"

My mother's harsh gasp jarred me from the stupor of watching and not acting. "Move," I hissed, pushing her forward. Becca's sudden stop had me pitching forward before regaining my balance. Her mouth hung open in equal measures of disgust and enthrallment. Following her gaze, I saw Randy shifting. I knew the feeling, but we didn't have time.

I pried my mother off of me as I stepped around Becca. Using my shoulder, I pushed over the heavy table, tossing all the food. It landed on its side with a resounding thud that was lost in the snarling all around us. Ford had said he would come to us, and I believed him. But I certainly wasn't about to present Belladonna's minions with an easy target.

"What's happening?" Becca hissed at me as I pulled her behind the table.

"We're being attacked, get your shoes off," I said.

"What—why?" my mother screeched at me.

"Because if we have to run, you are not tripping on your damn heels!" It took a moment for them both to get on board, but soon shoes were being chucked. Randy stayed close, watching our flank. Ford still hadn't showed up and I worried about him.

I reached for Edwin and found his thread. I did the same for Jaelle, but came up empty handed. Which I suppose wasn't surprising, since she had left with Olie and Logan, and the bond was probably starting to weaken. I blew out a breath. Did I command Edwin to protect us?

“TYLER!” Lionel roared. I snuck a glance over the top of the table at Lionel and his enemy before my mother hauled me back down. I was surprised to see them both in human form amidst the snarling wolves.

“What are you thinking?” she hissed.

“That we are surrounded by shifters who can easily murder us!” I hissed back.

“Come now, Lionel,” Tyler tsked, “you must have known we wouldn’t stand for this. Not only did you take in our lone wolf, but now you are extending pack protection to a pathetic human and her human mage freak friend. I don’t think so.”

Lionel growled and I peeked back over the table, my perfectly manicured nails digging into the wood as I watched Tyler nonchalantly stroll toward him.

“But you are in luck!” the asshole went on. “I’m a bargaining man, and I’m willing to forgive and forget if I can have Becca and Penni.” I swallowed, not looking at Becca and the gasp she drew.

“Never.” Lionel drew the word out around his growl.

“What are they to you, but replaceable humans?” Tyler continued. “Hardly worth your time.”

Lionel smiled, a savage, toothy thing. “You want them, you go through us.”

I did dip down then, because the baying and yipping of the wolves sent my heartbeat into overdrive. It was clear now that we weren’t getting out of there. We needed to find a way to help, not just hide.

Snarls ripped the air, beastly and bloodthirsty, followed by the grotesque crashing of a flood of bodies carving into each other. I blinked hard, running a hand over my face, forgetting the time-consuming makeup brushed artfully there.

“What do we do?” Becca asked, her icy fingers digging into my arm.

“Wait until there’s an opening,” I said, pushing up to look again.

Randy growled from his post before taking a hit from a white and gray wolf with dripping red fangs. We all screamed, I’m afraid to admit, watching in horror while they rolled out of sight. The snarling and snapping of jaws sickened my stomach.

Panic threatened to seize my brain, but I refused to let it. Instead, I cataloged possible weapons. We had shoes, the chairs behind us and not much else against sharp teeth and claws. Fucking hell.

Belladonna’s voice rose and I peeked back up to look at her. Arms held high, head thrown back, she was in the center of the battle, and yet no one touched her. I narrowed my eyes, switching into my second sight. Power was trickling out of her. I was too far away and too inexperienced to know exactly what she was doing, but I knew we needed to stop her. How?

Wait a motherfucking moment. I had powers! Powers that I clearly had forgotten about. Digging my hands into the ground, I pulled the elements to me, mixing powerful cords with an instinct I didn’t understand, but trusted intimately.

Blowing out a breath, I stood, scoring my palm with my perfectly groomed nails to draw blood. I gathered and weaved the power in front of me. I inhaled deeply before shoving the power at her, using everything I had learned from Jaelle and throwing with all the strength I could muster. She stumbled, her face ashen in surprise, then righted herself and scowled.

“Give it back, you bitch!” she screamed at me, before muttering to begin another spell. Shaking out my hands, I ducked as a wolf attempted to tear out my throat.

“I want her ALIVE!” Belladonna screamed.

I couldn’t tell if we were winning or losing. I didn’t know everyone in their wolf forms, hell I didn’t even know all of Lionel’s pack in human form. All I saw was fighting, blood and matted fur. Blowing out another breath, I focused on forming a circle around our small group, noting that I didn’t see Randy. *Please don’t let him be dead.*

...

Ford was shocked to see Edwin fighting alongside his pack, with wicked, smiling fangs and equally deadly hands tearing into the wolf shifters. Watching him for only a moment, Ford let his rage at the vampire give way to being glad Edwin was on their side.

Snarling, biting, clawing. It was close quarters, and deadly.

Ford spared a look at Lionel and Tyler, both bloody and snarling in their human forms. Shifting would be a moment of weakness, and neither wanted to give the other that opportunity. Since this was a dirty fight, anything went. Ford snapped the neck of the wolf he had been fighting, moving on the next. How Tyler had grown his pack this big was beyond him. The idiot could hardly turn a wolf properly, let alone care for this many.

And how the hell had the damn witch ended up partners in crime with these idiots?

He snarled, facing off against a black wolf streaked with silver, a low growl vibrating up his throat. They were all going to die. Attacking the pack during a full moon was war. Dammit. He wished Logan and Olivia had decided to stay.

Ford lunged for the wolf, snagging a chunk of shoulder meat before withdrawing, his muzzle bloody. What should have been a debilitating wound that gave Ford the advantage healed before his eyes, with a speed that was reserved for vampires, not shifters.

Ford’s eyes rounded as he looked at the disappearing wound and back to the wolf’s eyes. The asshole shook its black and silver streaked head, its scent changing. Ford wrinkled his nose, trying to place exactly what the change was and why it unnerved him so, as if the accelerated healing wasn’t enough.

Magic. It whispered along his skin, made him sneeze, and caused him to snarl savagely. Damn Belladonna.

...

I exhaled, the circle now cast for my mom and Becca, blood trickling down my palm. Why I didn’t put myself inside the damn protection circle, I didn’t know. I just knew I needed to be mobile. I had a part to play in this, and while I didn’t completely understand it, my stolen magic could help.

Flexing my hands, I prepared to stand—to do what, I hadn’t thought about much, except expending energy in massive quantities to knock out Belladonna.

Squatting, I dug into the earth again, pulling deeply, inhaling elemental magic into my human body, Jaelle’s warning about not overdoing it completely forgotten in my panic.

The moment stilled and calm surrounded me, sinking into me with the perfect knowledge that I was a motherfucking powerhouse.

Smiling, I stood, disheveled hair floating around my face, everyone and everything moving in slow motion. I stood straighter, magic pulsing through me, nature whispering all around, although something was in disharmony. An errant note that drew my attention to Belladonna. I didn't even remember stepping around the overturned table.

Tendrils of magic flowed from her, distorted and raw. I followed the threads, deepening the cut in my palm. She was giving the attacking pack healing abilities. My mind stalled out on that one; didn't they already have superior healing? Then I watched Ford rip a bloody chunk of shoulder out of an attacker, only to have the missing flesh reappear instantly.

I blinked, the sound of the fight around us disappearing. How the fuck was that possible? It shouldn't be, I mean Ford healed quickly, but—I pulled up my second sight again. Maybe it was an illusion ... and I would know what those looked like?? No, but my random thought was rewarded. Cords, fraying and red, were tied to the opposition. They pulsed in a rhythm I didn't understand.

With a growl that would have made Ford proud, I started slicing at the cords. Nothing happened at first. I blew out an irritated breath.

Attempting to hone my magic into a sharp, gut-splitting blade, I tried again, and landed on my ass.

"Fuck!" I screamed. I had to help them, how could they take down an enemy with perfect healing. How? How? In my frustration, I ripped out pieces of my tightly pinned hair. What would Olivia do?

Ford was limping heavily, his blood staining the ground, his exhaustion palpable. My heart constricted painfully at the sight of his lolling tongue, with not a snarl in sight.

Olivia would kill the source.

I ran for Belladonna, having nothing to guide me but the magic of an unknown magician and a new, savage bloodthirstiness that, in hindsight, wouldn't bother me a bit.

I careened for her. Not slowing or giving my own well-being a damn thought, I ran right into a fucking shifter. Claws sliced from my left shoulder across my stomach, ending at my right hip. I fell forward, hitting the ground hard, my blood spilling beneath me. Rolling, I searched between the paws of my attacker, trying to survey the scene and find Ford, all while breathless and prone on my back.

The paws moved away from me, the shifter apparently leaving me to Belladonna or to slowly bleed out. I willed a hand to my stomach and it came away bloody, horribly bloody. I wasn't going to make it back from this one. All the people I loved were here, and I was going to fail them all.

Tears stung my eyes and slipped down my cheeks. I wished I had asked Olie how to use magic to kill. Maybe, maybe I could suck the life out of her. Clearly, it had been done to others since I now had her stolen magic, and perhaps it would give our side the advantage we needed.

I imagined my magic, which took on the same color as the blood fleeing my body. Not giving myself a chance to think about that, I flung it at her, screaming in pain as my stomach muscles attempted to contract in their severed state. I recoiled but didn't let my head fall all the way back, even with blurred vision and black spots threatening to end me.

I willed my corded magic into a lasso and it landed perfectly. Twisting my left arm, I wrapped the cord around my forearm before pulling, and pulling, and pulling. It was agony keeping my head up to see her. I watched her arms slowly lower to her sides, the chanting ending, her snarl raw and feral. She met my gaze with disgust and a rage I had never witnessed before. She took a step toward me before pausing, looking around at "her" pack failing.

Her gaze must have snagged on Becca and my mom, for she smiled and began walking toward them, her purple robes flowing around her ankles. I gasped out a breath, tears leaking down my once perfectly made up face, and rolled to my knees with a cry born of pure agony. For a moment, I could only breathe, could only feel the searing heat and pain that stole my vision.

But I came back, seeing Belladonna, arms raised around my circle. Not today, bitch. Arm still pressed around my stomach, I stood, every step bringing blistering agony.

Belladonna's smile when she smashed my circle made me sick. We shared magic, powerful magic, and apparently it remembered her. Randy was overpowered and one wolf was sneaking behind my mother. I lost it then. Pulling every scrap of magic I could, I blasted the wolves attacking Randy. He could save them, he could protect them.

My knees gave out as an espresso muzzle pushed into my diminishing line of sight.

...

"Don't leave me," Ford whispered.

My mother's hysterical screaming, along with Becca's sorrowful sobs, grated against my already throbbing headache. Unless I was hallucinating, they were alive. But something smelled wrong and Becca was sobbing something I didn't understand. "They bit us, they bit us..." over and over again.

"Fix her!" demanded Lionel. Who he was talking to, I didn't know. I was pretty certain I was beyond fixing. "She's dying!" his voice cracked on the last word.

"What is her life worth to you?" Edwin asked.

I attempted a scowl, but I couldn't feel my face.

"Far more than yours," hissed Ford. "If she dies, you die. The moon isn't at its zenith yet."

In my mind, I could see Edwin contemplating that, wondering if he could risk it or not.

"I feel fine, it's possible all this magic use sped up the process."

"It's possible we will kill you, anyway," Lionel growled.

Edwin sighed, a huffed-through-the-nose sound, clearly debating.

"Safety," Lionel finally bit out. "We'll grant you pack status and safety in that."

I expected Edwin to scoff at such an offer. Why would he, the all-powerful vampire, need shifters?

"Agreed," he responded instead, shocking me.

Something warm trickled into my mouth and I spat it away, coughing as I struggled to breathe, crying out in pain at my stomach muscles being used.

"Hold her," Edwin warned. The warmth was back and I whipped my head around, trying to refuse it, some instinct warning me not to take it in, even on my deathbed.

But I wasn't strong enough to voice my concern, or even open my eyes. The liquid pooled in my mouth until I drank purely on survival instinct. It spoke of copper pennies, warm and tangy. I gagged once, twice, before the heat of the blood hit my stomach. I expected to throw up, but instead my eyes snapped open and I latched onto Edwin's wrist. I met his gaze, pulling his blood into me.

I expected to find disgust in his eyes. That's certainly how I felt when he drank from me. But I wasn't feeling disgust at all. I felt powerful, on fire, and horny as hell.

Edwin's eyes lit up amber as his fangs peeked down in his mouth. "Stop," he commanded, his gaze tense.

My fingers dug into his arm. "Enough," Ford whispered, pulling me off.

I snarled, wild and angry. Ford whispered close to my ear, "Easy baby, easy, come back to me." But I was too far gone, bucking against him, snarling and carving into his arm. He hissed into my ear before I felt the soft flesh of my neck violently pierced.

"Easy," Ford warned again.

Sharp fangs popping into my flesh set me on fire, and not in the sexy kind of way. My body bucked again while I sucked in a shocked breath, the heat eating me from inside.

"Penni, Penni, talk to me," Ford whispered, his chocolate gaze rimmed in gold. He pulled back as fear flicked across his face.

"She's burning up!" He yelled.

Lionel came into my vision, worry pinching his eyes. "She's been bitten and clawed." His voice was so loud. Why, why was it so loud?

"I pulled," I whispered, "I pulled her magic," I grated out the sentence between the uncontrollable shaking.

"What does that mean?" Ford bellowed.

"I ... I think some ... something is wrong," I whispered.

My lids closed of their own will, heavy and unrelenting. I gave in, but there was no peace to be found in that darkness, only pain. The magic I'd pulled from Belladonna pinged around my head. I needed to do something with it, tether it somehow, just as the magician's magic was held in place inside of me. The question was, how?

Not that I had much time to give to that question while an inferno ate me from within. My insides burned, and I was certain if I looked down, I would see only a gaping hole where my stomach should be. The bite on my neck from Ford throbbed in time with my heart. I was losing something, I knew it. Blood, possibly, sanity, more likely.

Let me in, I heard as no one spoke.

Yep, there goes sanity. It's been nice. Apparently, I'd overused my limited human ability to use magic. Fantastic.

It was so fucking hot. I was burning up and shivering at the same time. My hearing was gone, like totally, while I could feel hands touching me, a cool reprieve from my overheated self. It was like existing in a sensory deprivation pod. Yes, I had done one, there was a group. Don't judge.

Breathing was becoming challenging.

Let me IN!

Who the fuck was that?

Long fangs dropped from a snarling jaw. I saw fur, the color of new snow, and dark eyes glaring at me. Her body was all tightly corded muscles. I had seen Ice Age, which is the only reason I knew the creature in front of me was a saber-tooth tiger.

I had definitely, totally, head to toe and back again, lost it.

Let me in! she demanded again from a mouth of impressive fangs.

Kay. And just like that, I dropped my guards.

Probably stupid, but it wasn't like she was real.

Lancing pain radiated out from my chest and my eyes snapped open from shock, a breath trapped in my lungs for what seemed like hours before I could finally exhale. I registered nothing. Not Ford crying over me, not my mother bawling into hysterics, nor my own body mending.

I was once again falling into the strange land of darkness, the land between awake and dreams that I'd only walked in for short intervals. The pain radiated out again, and this time, primal instincts emerged with it.

Kill. Mate. Survive.

The saber-tooth grinned, if such a thing is possible, as she moved her massive head from side to side, evaluating me.

So, you're an extinct species. I'm Penni, pretty sure I'm going insane from drinking vampire blood right after pulling magic from a witch. Nice to meet you.

She stretched out to her massive length, yawning. Well, fuck. I sucked in a stuttering breath, my body arching, bones breaking. I was shifting.

Holy fucking hell. Maybe I wasn't going crazy!

Bones elongated, tightly bound muscles re-formed and connected my body in a way it never had been before. Keeping my head elevated took a monumental effort. The world was awash in raw colors, colors I'd seen before but that had never looked so mesmerizing until that moment.

I let my head sag, feeling warm paws on either side of it and hind legs folding under me.

Ford was looking down at me in awe or horror, I wasn't sure. While I could see him, my brain was having a hard time actually processing all the sensory input.

"Penni?" he asked gently, kneeling down.

"Yes?" I meowed. Wait, I fucking meowed?! I tried to speak again. Nothing was coming out how I intended it to. What the actual FUCK?!

I growled, pawing at my face, frustrated that I didn't understand what was happening, that I couldn't communicate. I flexed my nails into the earth and yes, flicked my mother. Fucking. Tail.

This was not right.

Lionel spoke while I hissed and screeched, not even recognizing that the sounds were coming from me. "Easy, Penni, you've shifted for the first time. And you've shifted into something—" he faltered, clearly at a loss for words. What was wrong with me? "Something we haven't seen before."

I wanted to go back to normal, like now! I didn't want fur and I sure as fuck didn't want to be an extinct species!

I sniffed the air, drawing the myriad of scents into my lungs, my brain rapidly sorting them. *We need to go.*

And just like that, my four feet had me moving forward toward the scent of deep woods and wild game. It took a while before I lost the scents and sounds of being followed. Finally alone, I traveled in ease, allowing myself to enjoy my newfound speed and agility.

I'm sure the rabbit that crossed my path didn't share that enjoyment.

The wind through our fur, ground beneath our paws, the thrill of the hunt. Everything was intense and beautiful, and at some point, I just let go and let the beast inside of me rule. The sun rose and set, more than once, and I still felt no need to return to the world of my original birth, at least not yet.

...

We were lying down and I was staring at our reflection in a slow-moving stream. The fangs protruding from my top gums put Edwin's to shame. Turning a paw sideways, I examined the razor-sharp claws that extended and retracted.

As I rumbled deep in my chest, I knew I couldn't maintain this form forever. But I didn't have a clue how to shift back to human. Nor was she willing to go without a little push.

A rustling in the trees had me lifting my head. I let loose a low growl as a massive russet lion prowled toward us with a growl of his own. Even viewing him from my new form, he was gigantic.

"Hey, Penni!" Olie said, plowing through the bush behind the lion, whose maned head stood above hers. "A saber-tooth tiger, huh? That's awesome. I think Logan is jealous," she teased.

I tilted my head, rising and shifting my weight back to run.

"Easy." Olie held out her hands, slowing her forward progress. "We're here to help. Don't go all beastly on us."

What's beastly? I wanted to ask. Instead, I backed up again from her advances. Logan gave another low growl, and I tucked tail and ran.

"Dammit, Logan!" Olie chided him. "I hate running!"

I loped easily, having no real goal in mind except solitude. When did Olie and Logan get here, anyway? Had I been wandering out in the woods that long? I can't say the thought bothered me at all.

I spent the night with the stars, gazing up from my side, having discovered a clear stream of babbling water to keep me company. With a yawn, I cleaned my paws before settling down to sleep.

...

A pop jerked me from my blissful slumber, followed by a whistling that had me on all four paws and attempting to bound away. I didn't make it far before being taken to the ground by something that fell from above. I thrashed, using the razor claws on my back paws to slice at the ropes that were binding me. The talons just grated off metal, not doing a damn thing except irritating me.

Snarling, fighting, the metal burning into my flesh, I cried out. I chomped down hard, the metal burning my gums and lips.

"She's hurting herself!" someone yelled.

"Dammit, Logan, bite her!"

The metal net was flung off. Sweet relief flowed through my body, my head arching up, before a lion latched onto my neck.

I exhaled fury, the air hissing between my teeth, my lungs clamping shut.

Breathe, Penni, Logan counseled.

What is happening?

You've been turned into a shifter. You need to turn back human now.

A snarl ripped through my mind and I hissed out another breath.

How? I whispered in my mind.

Remember how your body felt. Remember your legs, your arms, how the grass would feel against your cheek... He continued on, focusing intently on each part of my body—feet, calves, wrists, fingers, until I felt the change unfolding inside of me, closely followed by pure terror.

Don't fight it, he warned.

I didn't understand how that was possible. I was certain my body was being ripped apart from the inside by a long-fanged monster that, by the way, was extinct.

When I opened my eyes again, Logan looked down at me with a caramel gaze and a tilted lion head that showed surprise.

I pawed my muzzle. Wait, my what?! What the fuck? I let out a whine.

You've shifted into a wolf, Logan's voice echoed in my head.

What is happening? I cried out again in my mind, desperation lacing my words.

You're a dual shifter, evidently. Cool. Olie's voice rung out clear and strong in my head. *Try for human again.*

I did as requested, latching onto Logan's voice as he talked me through it again. It was easier this time, like puzzle pieces interlocking into place.

I opened my eyes to human hands covering my face, while my ears found the familiar sound of a human voice sobbing. Gaining some minor control of myself, I sat up to the surprising sight of my body, totally, stark naked. I combed my fingers through my hair as Ford covered me with a coarse blanket.

"Are you okay?" he whispered, nuzzling my neck.

I nodded, even though I was visibly shaking.

"I don't understand," I whispered. "I'm a saber-tooth tiger *and* a wolf?" I looked into his dark eyes for guidance, finding only remorse.

Olie was the one to fill me in. "You were clawed by one shifter and bitten by another. With all that, combined with the magic you've pulled and Edwin's blood, you now have two powerful beasts to control inside of you. Plus whatever magic you may still have."

"How many dual shifters are there?" I asked.

Olie shared a look with Logan, now in human form and getting dressed. "I've only met one other," she finally offered. "It's a status of immense power, but only the truly strong can maintain it. One beast to contend with is more than most can handle."

“And two is damn near impossible,” Logan finished for her, his eyes offering nothing but the simple truth of how insane this whole situation was.

I sighed. “I’m starving and I think I ate a bunny.” That confession left me nauseous.

Warmth surrounded me as Ford picked me up. A heaviness eased out from my lungs, and I knew I was safe.

“Your wolf looks exactly like mine,” he muttered.

I huffed out an attempted laugh, but the sound only conveyed my bone-deep exhaustion.

“Guess I have good taste,” I muttered.

His lips brushed my temple, his heartbeat thumping a slow and steady rhythm that lulled me into sleep, or perhaps just an exhaustion so deep I was lost to the world.

...

I dreamt of snow-covered hills, dotted with sparse trees, a blanketed world in eternal winter. In a blink, I was nestled deep in the woods, branches snapping under foot, owls hooting in the distance as I tracked my prey.

Ford was ahead, staring down into a deep pool of water, face drawn, shoulders hunched, pain radiating off him. I clawed at the ground, trying to get to him. Needing to help him. I cried out, perching now at the divide between us in human form. Ground falling away, trees dying, blue skies turning red. Yet still Ford stood there, trapped and apart from me.

My soul wept.

Clawed hands dragging across an invisible barrier. My voice the only noise.

Ford’s head rose and my screaming and clawing renewed, but he wouldn’t look at me. He wouldn’t come to me, even though he had to. His safety depended on it. He had to come to me.

How could I make him understand? He had to come to me.

But no matter how I screamed, no matter how I begged, he never looked over. Never even acknowledged me.

I lashed out, not knowing where I was.

“Easy, Penni,” Ford whispered, holding my thrashing my body. I landed several blows, but he didn’t flinch, his grasp upon me never faltering.

“Ford,” I whispered his name reverently. “Ford, Ford, Ford,” I repeated it, running my hands over his back. Pulling away, I cradled his face between my hands.

“I’m here,” he whispered in the dark. “I’m here.”

I nodded, tears flowing down my cheeks. He rubbed my back, his own breathing easing as I settled down.

“Go back to sleep,” he whispered softly, laying me back down. I clung to him, my arms and legs wrapped around him, unable to let him go. I needed him on some deeper level and as I drifted off, I wondered how many twin wolves there were.

...

My head throbbed. Along with my entire body. I had been to a Cross Fit class once, and screamed in agony for days afterward anytime I had to sit down. This was far worse.

Groaning, I forced myself into an upright position, rubbing scratchy eyes.

My breathing felt loud, as did my heartbeat. Forcing my eyes open, I peered around the room. My stomach muscles pulled, drawing a hiss from me. I looked down at the oversized white shirt I was wearing, trying to piece together what happened.

Temples throbbing in time to the crashing of my heartbeat, I rolled my head on my shoulders as fragments flashed before my eyes. Full moon ceremony ... shifter attack ... fucking Belladonna ... I traced my bottom lip. Edwin's blood.

I was scared to look for the thread that had connected us, but I did, steeling myself with a tentative breath before diving inside of myself.

It was crowded in there. Voices pinged around my head, whispers and images, people I knew. Lionel with his fingers interlocked in front of him, resting his chin on that base, his eyes haunted, worried, and angry.

Fury spiraled down my spine, arching me forward and pulling my still-healing stomach muscles taut. Hesitantly, I looked closer at the scene. Ford's scent washed over me. I could see him pacing.

...

"We have to find this damn witch," he growled, pacing in front of Lionel.

Lionel raised his head from his clasped hands. "Logan and Olie are working on it. We need Penni to wake up and..." His voice trailed off.

"She's fine, she woke up once and went back to sleep," Ford said.

Lionel sighed. "You and I both know that isn't enough to prove she's in control or at least managing well. She has two"—he held up two fingers to emphasis the point—"TWO beasts within her. One is a damn saber-tooth TIGER! Not to mention the other is an EXACT copy of your wolf."

"She has control, and if she doesn't, I'll see her through it."

Lionel stood. "You better hope she does or you can, because we cannot have her running loose, unable to restrain herself. We would be forced to put her down," he growled, staring Ford down. Ford didn't look away, and neither did Lionel.

...

I stumbled out of the room, recognizing my surroundings as the basement before I heaved and crawled up the steps to find Lionel and Ford fighting. Lying prone on the floor, I shifted. Into which form, I didn't know. A low growl issued forth from my throat.

They both stilled with their fists raised and bruises forming, blood tracking down Ford's lip before it healed. Seeing it, I snarled again, pushing myself into my furred and clawed feet. I snapped my jaws, heat searing my veins. Raw and uncontrolled, I knew nothing except that Lionel had hurt what was mine.

The sound of my jaws snapping filled the silence.

"Penni, no," wheezed Ford, moving toward me.

My brow furrowed in my confusion. Lionel twitched slightly and my white head swung back to him.

"Shit," Ford hissed.

My paws were heavy as I padded forward.

“Penni, you can’t shift this often right now. You have to get control. You cannot attack Lionel.” His voice cracked and I scented his pain and fear on the air.

It paused my forward progress. Who was Penni?

You are, an authoritative voice said in my mind.

I shook my massive head, trying to expel his words, the images it was causing to replay.

Remember, Penni. Remember those who depend on you, a female voice whispered, dropping images of my mother huddled in a corner, terrified.

Ice ran through my veins as I examined that image. She was still wearing the dress from the full moon celebration. But that was days ago, wasn’t it? How long had I run as the tiger?

Remembering Logan’s instructions, I shifted back, willing my claws into fingers, my legs into femur bones, panting. In truth, panting was all I could do as Ford’s arm wrapped around me. My body felt boneless. A throbbing cleaved my head and my stomach revolted. I clawed the plush carpeting with my de-clawed fingers, willing myself to sit up.

Ford helped. Okay, so maybe he sat me up and let me lean against him.

“Where’s my mom?” I rasped.

“She’s down in the holding cells,” Ford said softly. “She isn’t doing well.”

I huffed, “And trying to attack Lionel is doing well?”

Logan laughed as a door closed. “I’ll let Olie handle that one.”

“Girl,” she said, sitting down in front of me, “you went from human to flesh-eating, bone-crunching, violent shifter exceptionally well. Your control needs refining, and to learn that—” She paused, looking to Ford behind me. “You have to come with us.”

“No,” Ford growled.

Olie shook her head. “Logan can control her, or at least get through to her. You can’t, and neither can Lionel. Plus, it doesn’t help how violently protective she is of you. She won’t learn control if she’s constantly fighting her instincts to jump in and tear someone apart for you.”

I held tightly to the arm Ford draped possessively across my stomach.

“She’s right, Ford,” Lionel said, coming to stand above Olie’s shoulder. “I can’t make the pack bond work with her, and it should, since you also bit her.”

“You bit me?” I asked, turning to Ford.

He nodded, espresso eyes pained, dark smudges forming under them. “I could scent the change on you, and I didn’t want you to belong to that pack.”

I nodded, laying my head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat, letting it ground me.

“My mom?” I asked softly.

Ford sighed, nuzzling my hair.

“Can I see her?” I asked softly, turning to Lionel, who looked distressed and pained before nodding curtly once.

“Can you walk?” Olie asked with a raised eyebrow, gently accepting Logan’s hand helping her up. Those two were a surprise a minute.

I grunted and so did Ford as he helped me up.

The stink eye I leveled at him had him chuckling. “What? You weigh more now.”

“Oh, damn,” Olie said. “Want Logan to help?”

Someone chuckled behind me, I’m assuming Logan, while Ford snarled a response.

I’ll let that go ... for now, Logan warned. Ford just glowered next to me.

Can he hear you? I tentatively tried.

Only if we want him to, Olie answered, her voice all shit-eating grin.

Olie took the weight on my left side and we managed the grueling stairs, heading down into Lionel’s basement and extra rooms.

“Where’s Becca?” I rasped.

Lionel sighed, walking down the hallway. “She’s in another holding cell with Randy.”

“Holding cell?” I squeaked. “Like what I was in?”

Lionel sighed. “No, you were in a room. Both Ford and Logan said they could handle you if shit went bad.” His tone said he disagreed with at least one of them; so much for our long-time relationship.

I nodded, wondering what exactly “bad” meant, given that I’d been ready to gut him moments ago.

“How’s Becca handling it?” I asked, twisting my attention away from my own failings as I accepted the oversized sweatshirt Olie handed me.

Ford huffed, but Lionel answered, stopping and unlocking a door. “Better than your mother, not as well as you. Shifting is painful, which you know, but the urges, the intensity of the need to hunt, fight and fuck, can be overwhelming for some.”

“We call those who succumb to those needs ‘beasts,’” Olie clarified.

“What happens to them?” I asked softly.

Her lips flattened. “If we can’t save them, we put them down. There’s no choice.”

“My mother?” I tried, my voice a broken whisper.

“It’s too soon to tell,” Logan said behind me.

Olie met his gaze, her own hardening, before Lionel cleared his throat. His hand weighed heavily on the silver door handle.

“I’ll go in with Penni,” Lionel said. Settling himself with a breath, he pulled open the door and stepped in. I reeled back, only Ford’s support at my back keeping me from toppling into the hallway. The stench of fear overpowered my senses, making my mouth salivate and my wolf and tiger rise to the surface. A low rumble shook out of me.

“Fight it,” Olie said firmly. “That’s your damn mother.”

Hissing out a breath, I unslung my arm from around Ford's shoulders before hobbling into the room. I managed to flop down in an oversized chair, and didn't see myself getting up anytime soon.

Managing my own pain, which was a welcome distraction from the scents in the room, I looked for my mom. She was just as Olie had painted the picture. Dried tear tracks of ruined mascara marred her beautiful face. Her usually impeccably styled hair hung greasy where it wasn't still pinned up.

"Oh baby," she cried, "what did they do to us?" She moved toward me to hug me while I sat. Kneeling down in front of me, she took my face into her hands, with sorrow and regret etched on her own. I watched it all rather impassively, whether that was from the exhaustion or the beasts within, I didn't know.

I heaved a sigh, knowing I should have more patience to walk her through this. "How are you adjusting, Mom?" I asked softly.

She barked a laugh at me. "Adjusting?" she pulled her body away from me, going back to sitting on the bed.

"Adjusting?" she scoffed again, more to herself than me.

Lionel growled a warning. Who it was for, I wasn't sure.

"Why would I adjust to this madness? It's madness!" she screamed. "I don't want to be a shifter. I don't want to be a wolf." Her voice pitched up to hysteria. "I don't want it!" she repeated, scratching at herself and pulling at her hair.

My heart was heavy. "You have to get through this, Mom. You have to adjust." Shit, we all did. There would be a time to mourn for my human life, but it wasn't now.

She scoffed at me. "Excuse me for wanting my humanity back! Unlike my daughter, who took the witch's power, who volunteered to be part of a society we NEVER should have been anywhere near!" Fresh tears slipped down her cheeks. "Why? Why did you have to go and get involved? Wasn't being human good enough? WHY?!" she wailed.

"She doesn't mean it," Lionel muttered.

"Yes," my mom hissed, "she does."

I just breathed, the anger in my belly searing up my spine, painful as fuck. I wanted to blame it for the tears that slipped down my face, but some wounds go deeper even than shifter pain.

I searched for something of my mother, desperately wishing for it. But maybe this was actually her, stripped down to primal humanity, reduced to base instincts. Maybe my mother really didn't like me.

My wolf rumbled in my chest. It didn't matter if she did or not. I was powerful. I was adjusting. And I was quickly discovering that I liked being a shifter.

"You need to shower," I rumbled at her.

She scoffed again. "Make me!" she hissed.

I growled, knowing I couldn't get off the chair.

"Mom, you have to fight through this, you have to survive. This isn't the end, it's just..." I searched for the right word, settling on, "different." I'll admit, that choice didn't quite encompass the vast weight of what was happening.

“GET OUT!” she screamed. “GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT!” She pulled on her hair, taking a clump out. Razor claws sprouted from her hands as she pawed at her already ruined dress, long rivulets of blood trailing over the destroyed fabric.

I did what she said, painfully realizing as I backed away that she hadn’t even asked if I was okay.

Olie’s eyes were hard; her frown, miserable. “I think being bitten by the magically enhanced wolves has caused them to be unbalanced. We’ve seen it before, where shifters use magic to enhance their speed or strength, and go insane from it.”

I was certain I heard my heart break in my chest. “Why? Why I am I different?” I asked on a whisper.

“For one thing, Ford bit you, not the other pack. They did claw at you, which began the change, but didn’t create the bond. So you didn’t have to deal with that added bullshit. Second, Edwin fed you his blood.”

Edwin. The name pinged inside of me, and suddenly I was flowing down a dark tunnel to stare at a dirty martini and contemplate where my life was going, and how it would be ruined by being attached to a dual shifter. Then again, there were benefits to being bonded with one of the most powerful creatures in the shifter world. It was just a matter of getting her to do my bidding...

I snapped back into myself.

“Shit,” I hissed. “We’re bonded. Like, permanently.”

Ford growled low. “Yeah, and definitely not in a fun way.”

Olie sighed. “Sorry, kid, that’s the price of being alive. Trust me, I’m no fan of vampires, but he saved your ass. We won’t go into his demand for safety in return for the favor, though.”

“He what?” I growled.

“Yeah, that’s between you and him. Again, not going into it,” Olie said.

“Ugh.” I had to see him, had to deal with it. Right? Or maybe I could just avoid the problem for a while and sleep.

I rubbed my temples in frustration, exhaustion weighing heavily on me. I couldn’t sleep. Not yet. I had to talk with Edwin. I turned to Ford and said as much. He nodded once, tightly. The sound of my mother screaming weighed heavily on me. I should have gone to see Becca, too, but I wasn’t sure I could endure seeing them both in such dire conditions.

...

Still a little shaky on my feet, I found Edwin in a deer stand within easy walking distance of the house. Possibly, he had felt me rooting around in his mind and my desire to talk to him, and thus ditched the martini. Climbing the final step, I heaved my weight against the unfinished plywood. I let my head thump back, unsure where to start.

“Thank you for saving me,” I tried.

He shrugged. “They granted me protection, it was a good trade.”

I didn’t look at him. The irritation I thought I would feel just wasn’t there. He was trying to survive, and considering he was Houseless and had been enslaved by the witches, I couldn’t fault him.

With more effort than I really had in me, I pulled my knees to my chest.

“My mom isn’t doing well,” I whispered.

Edwin's blond hair slowly turned to me. "I know."

"What else do you know?" I asked softly.

He tilted his head at me. "Why do you think I know more?"

I tapped my chest. "I can feel it."

His eyes narrowed. "What else can you tell?"

"Where you were," I admitted. "There are no secrets between us anymore."

He scoffed, "You are foolish if you think that."

I smiled, "I'm not scared of it, either."

He narrowed those eerie eyes again. "You should be. You've tethered yourself to a vampire for the rest of your life. How do you think Ford is going to feel about that?"

I shrugged. "How do you think he feels that I'm a dual shifter and his twin in wolf form?"

Edwin inclined his head. "Your beloved has quite a bit to digest, it seems."

I nodded, worrying my bottom lip. "As does Becca," I added.

"She has Randy to lead her through this." Edwin reminded me.

I grunted, whether aloud or not, I didn't know or care.

"What's eating you?" Edwin asked, turning his body to face me.

"Belladonna's still out there," I whispered softly, giving voice to my worry and my fear. "She can come back," I said, turning toward him.

"Penelope, you have absorbed her power and the magician magic she stole, and now have the company of a saber-tooth tiger and a wolf. I don't think you have anything to fear." Edwin's voice was soft, dare I say understanding? Or was this just a ploy to get me to do his bidding?

I shook my head. "Olivia wants me to go with her." I watched him closely.

Edwin only nodded, looking back across the wilderness. It was quiet between us for long moments, but not uncomfortable. I guess it should have felt strange to be tethered to Edwin, but it didn't, or maybe I was just too tired to give a damn.

"I understand her logic, but what do you think of it?" Edwin asked.

"I haven't, honestly. I have—well, had a life. I had plans." Resting my head on my knees, I wondered if I could be a dual shifter and have a normal life. Could I go back and finish school? Take the job I had lined up? "I don't suppose I could pick up my old life and pretend this didn't happen?" I asked.

"No, your beasts won't allow it," Edwin reminded me. As if to prove his point, I felt an unsettling inside of me. With a heavy sigh, I closed my eyes, letting the tears slip down my face. How much was I going to lose? My mom? My best friend? My newly found love? What was the cost to fight an insane witch?

I wanted to be angry at it. At the injustice of it all. But I didn't have it in me.

"What will you do?" I asked Edwin.

He shrugged, "I don't know."

I nodded, rubbing my eyes, flicking the moisture away.

We stayed there until hunger drove me inside, and believe me, it took a lot to drive me to move. My legs were heavy and clumsy as I descended the deer stand, which really must have been for surveillance. The thought of shooting a deer was so very disappointing. But tearing it apart with my teeth while the warm blood flowed down my throat, ooohh. I repressed a shudder of delight as I walked into the kitchen with Edwin.

Ford was sitting at the kitchen table, hands around a mug.

“You’ve been gone for a while,” he stated, not looking at me.

I nodded. “There’s a lot to think about.”

“If you go with Olie, I can’t go with you,” he sprang on me.

“What?” I whispered. “I’ll come back, won’t I?”

He stood, his speed flinging back the chair. “Maybe. Maybe! If you can control your dual beasts.” He didn’t sound confident of that.

Ceasing his pacing, he turned to me. “What if you don’t want to come back?” he demanded.

“Ford,” I whispered, reaching for him, “you’re my heart.” I placed his hand on my chest. “I’ll come back to you. I don’t want to go, but Lionel’s right. I am driven to protect you no matter the cost. I have to learn control,” I said with conviction, tears slipping down my face yet again.

He kissed me hard. “I know, baby. I know.” He was just terrified of losing me, and he wasn’t the only one.

...

There was nothing to be done about it. I left my home, my mom, Becca and Ford behind. Everyone agreed I should be with the most powerful shifter there was, along with whatever the all-powerful fuck Olivia was. Plus, Olivia’s father might be able to offer some insight into my dual nature and the weird-ass bond with Edwin.

I just felt hollow. Like I was betraying my mother as she struggled with her identity, and my best friend, who wouldn’t even look at me. Ford’s anger followed me for a long time after we left. Even Edwin’s sorrow echoed around my head, and he was coming with us.

But I would learn control. I would master the beasts inside of me, and I was going to find the damn witch who had ruined us all.

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